

THE GENERAL CINEMA NORTH PARK I & II:  
A CASE STUDY OF A THIRD  
GENERATION MOVIE  
THEATER

by

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Abstract

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The purpose of this thesis is to present a typology of movie exhibition eras and then explore one of those eras in greater detail by studying a specific market and theater within that market. This methodology allows for influential industrial, social, and economic trends to be tracked before, during, and after the operational life of what is identified as a third generation movie theater. By choosing a single theater as a case study for this thesis, national shifts in business practices and economics are examined in order to study how these affected theaters at a micro level.



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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies. To grasp its secret, you should not, then begin with the city and move inwards towards the screen, you should begin with the screen and move outwards towards the city.<sup>1</sup>

—Jean Baudrillard

Very few subjects have captured as much interdisciplinary interest in the last century as the movie business. Numerous books and papers written on the movie industry have examined its influence within the context of various fields of study. The subjects of historical geography, social history, economics, anthropology, and population studies are just a few of the academic perspectives that have explored either the business of movies or individual films themselves in a scholastic context.<sup>2</sup>

The process of making films and the content of the movies has been the focus of nearly all the work done on the subject known as “movie history.” Because of this, leaders in both film creation (George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Ron Howard) and film distribution (Samuel Goldwyn, Louis B. Mayer, and Walt Disney) have had numerous works written about their lives and contributions to the craft. In addition to these, there are a great number of books about how specific movies have been made and their impact on both society and subsequent films.

The showplace for exhibiting these works, the movie theater, has not seen the same kind of historical analysis that the production and distribution sides of the industry have enjoyed. Researcher Marye Annette Polk argues that the places of exhibition are in need of greater study because they serve as:

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1989), 56.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Maltby, Daniël Biltreyst, and Philippe Meers, *Explorations in New Cinema History* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 8.

A source of qualitative information about the urban cultural experience . . . Movie theaters represent intriguing objects of study because of their public magnetism, capital generation, technological display, and mediation of consumer taste. In addition, they may be analyzed as mirrors of cultural process because the moviegoer is being sold a setting and an experience as much as a product.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in 2000, cinema history scholars began to realize this need and started to focus more on the cinema as the site of social and cultural exchange and less on the content of the films themselves. Together, this field of research has adopted the name “New Cinema History.”<sup>4</sup> Historians working in the area recognize the obvious fact that “cinemas are sites of social and cultural significance.” But they also recognize that a study of these sites has as much to say about “patterns of employment, urban development, transport systems, and leisure practices that shape cinema’s global diffusion as it does with what happens in the evanescent encounter between an individual audience member and a film print.”<sup>5</sup>

At this time, the work of new cinema history is limited to a relatively small number of papers and articles (many of which are collected into published anthologies that were used in researching this thesis). Most of these are hyper-focused on a specific theme or condensed time period. Film Theorist David Bordwell argued that this approach was necessary because “there is no one film history but only various question-motivated historical accounts.”<sup>6</sup> This idea is shared by new cinema historians who often choose the experience of a single theater location as their point of study. They argue that “the strength of cinema exhibition history lies in its aggregation of detail, in a way exactly analogous to the proposition that the more individual films we unearth and study, the more we know about films in general.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Marye Annette Polk, *From Movie Palace to Cinema Megaplex: The Changing Morphology of the Movie Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 2000), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Maltby, *Explorations in New Cinema History*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Maltby, *Explorations in New Cinema History*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> David Bordwell, “Foreward,” in *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, Douglas Gomery (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Maltby, “New Cinema Histories” in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd, 2011), 14.

The only complete book that has ever attempted to write the entire history of movie exhibition was Douglas Gomery's *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Theater Presentation in the United States* and it is considered to be the most accurate and comprehensive chronicle on the subject. Given the broad scope of this work, Gomery is able to compare and contrast how movies were exhibited in different eras throughout the twentieth century. In doing so, he attempted to counter Bordwell's theory that a singular film history could not be written.

The downside to being the primary repository for the complete story of movie exhibition is that many areas are glossed over and others are dismissed outright based on the author's preference. Gomery clearly favors the early palace theaters over the post-WWII multiple screen venues and his bias is evident not only in *Shared Pleasures*, but also in the papers "Motion Picture Exhibition in 1970s America,"<sup>8</sup> "If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall,"<sup>9</sup> and "The Picture Palace: Economic Sense or Hollywood Nonsense?"<sup>10</sup> He describes the palaces as:

Carefully crafted packages of pleasure that consistently generated high profits. Movies per se were never the sole driving force to attract audiences to ante up their quarters, fifty-cent pieces, and, at times, dollar bills. . . . The building was made so spectacular that it served as an attraction of its own."<sup>11</sup>

The history that he presented of the post-palace cinemas was both dismissive and hyperbolic:

What movie patrons received for their entertainment dollar in mall theaters, save locational centrality, proved as far from the golden days of the movie palace as one could imagine. A cluster of unadorned screening rooms offered only feature films and concession stands . . . the function, in the age of television, was clear: show

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<sup>8</sup> Douglas Gomery, "Motion Picture Exhibition in 1970s America" in *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam 1970-1979*, ed. David A. Cook (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 397-416.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Gomery, "If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall", in *Seeing Through Movies*, ed. Mark Crispin Miller (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 49-80.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Gomery, "The Picture Palace: Economic Sense or Hollywood Nonsense?", *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3, no. 1 (1978), 23-26.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 55.



blockbuster feature films and nothing else. Gone was the architectural ambience of the movie palace.”<sup>12</sup>

### *The Third Generation Movie Theater*

In his book, *Film: The Democratic Art*, Garth Jowett attempts to break up the complete narrative of movie exhibition by identifying “Generations” of theaters, each with its own distinct architectural, economic, and operational set of standards. Jowett categorized three distinct cycles of cinemas that had been operating through to the publishing of the book in 1976: the first generation was exhibitions up to and including the Nickelodeon, the second was palaces, and the third was multiplexes.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of this thesis is to present an alternative and more detailed history of these third generation theaters that contradicts Gomery’s position by using Dallas, and specifically the Cinemas at NorthPark I & II, as a case study. Furthermore, this approach opens up the ability to explore greater themes within the movie exhibition industry both locally and nationally during the thirty-three years that the Cinemas at NorthPark were in operation (1965-1998). These dates are important as they were not only the years this theater was open; it’s also a distinct era that starts with the large-scale closing of the downtown palace theaters (generation two theaters) and ends with the suburban megaplex boom of the late 1990s.

Dallas was chosen for study as the city because its suburbs have been influential in the way in which people watch movies throughout the entire history of motion pictures. Though the city has never been a leader in production, Dallas has the distinction of being the home of one of the first film distribution hubs (known as “exchanges,” the largest video rental company in the world (Blockbuster Video), and the third largest movie exhibitor in the country (Cinemark Theaters).

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<sup>12</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 99-100.

<sup>13</sup> Garth Jowett, *Film – The Democratic Art: A Social History of American Film* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 431.

This theater was specifically chosen as the focal point of study for several reasons: its location in a city that has always been a leader in movie exhibition, its popularity and national recognition as a trendsetter, and the fact that unlike other theaters of its era, the building was never modified nor changed how it operated. All of the other theaters in the area (even most nationally) were victims to the trend of “splitting” auditoriums that was widespread during this time.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the NorthPark I & II remained a twin throughout its history makes it an outlier, and this thesis will explore the factors that made this theater different from its contemporaries and how it was able to succeed without change for thirty-three years when so many other theaters around it came and went in half the time. In order to understand where the Cinemas at NorthPark fit into the history of movie exhibition, it is important to have a little background on how movies were presented in the city prior to 1965.

#### *First and Second Generation Theaters in Dallas*

The history of showing movies in Dallas began 1894 when the Dallas Opera House acquired several of Thomas Edison's Kinetoscopes<sup>15</sup> which would reproduce short films to an individual viewer on demand.<sup>16</sup> Soon after the turn of the century, going to the movies began to evolve into more of a communal experience: first with the introduction of itinerant exhibitors that traveled from town to town with portable projection systems, and eventually the nationwide adoption of the famous “Nickelodeon” as a means of going to the movies.<sup>17</sup> Though primitive, these early Nickelodeon cinemas were an important evolutionary step as they initiated the trend toward group spectatorship in fixed, permanent locations where people assembled for the purposes of watching a film on a screen.

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<sup>14</sup> The practice of “splitting” was to build walls in the auditorium and break the room up into smaller rooms, resulting in new, smaller, but more numerous auditoriums than before.

<sup>15</sup> D. Troy Sherrod, *Images of America: Historic Dallas Theatres* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014), 13.

<sup>16</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 18.

Here again, Douglas Gomery is quick to downplay the significance of these first generation exhibitors in his interpretation of the history of the movie-going experience. Gomery dismisses the Nickelodeon as a “small and uncomfortable makeshift theatre, usually a converted cigar store, pawnshop, restaurant, or skating rink made over to look like a vaudeville theatre.”<sup>18</sup>

Setting patron comfort and aesthetic value of the physical theater building aside, the most unique aspect of this generation was the way in which the early films were handled as a commodity business. At this point in its history, film was treated as a consumable product rather than a new form of art. Film prints themselves were sold outright from the producer to the exhibitor without any contract addressing how long the movie was to play or rights of resale. Even more indicative of this view of film as a commodity was the fact that the value assigned to film was based on its length and not relative to its content, director, or performers.<sup>19</sup>

In order to exploit this system in favor of the exhibitors, the city of Dallas began a pattern of trendsetting when it established itself as a major distribution center for the state of Texas.<sup>20</sup> Under this emerging new model, films (which were typically being produced in San Antonio at this time<sup>21</sup>) would be shipped to a distribution center or “depot” located in Dallas where they would then be rented out to theaters and returned to the depot of origin at the conclusion of the run.<sup>22</sup> This new system was of great benefit to all of the theaters as it was no longer up to the individual exhibitors to trade amongst themselves, while at the same time they increased the frequency with which they could open new product.<sup>23</sup>

By the time the second generation of exhibition came around, with the much larger palace theaters in the early 1920s, this model had shifted to a system where films were still

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<sup>18</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Tino Balio, *The American Film Industry*, rev. ed. (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 16.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Schroeder, *Lone Star Picture Shows* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2001), 28.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Balio, 17.

rented, but the movie's producer maintained ownership of the prints when leasing them to the individual theaters while still utilizing a centralized distribution center.<sup>24</sup> Although the role and purpose of the depot would change over the years, the fact that Dallas was the first city in Texas to establish the means for the distribution and transportation of films to the state cemented the city as an integral component of the exhibition industry's support structure that lasted all the way through the operating existence of the Cinemas at NorthPark.<sup>25</sup>

### *Dallas' First Theater Row*

The generation of movie exhibition that included the great palace theaters is one that has elicited a large amount of historical discourse, as well as a great deal of emotion from its admirers. Though these theaters differed in terms of size and the type of programming that each had to offer, most had two common criteria. First, they were incredibly ornate structures, both inside and out, built specifically with the intention of overpowering the aesthetic sensibilities of people regardless of whether they were watching movies inside or just passing by on the street.<sup>26</sup> Second, the exhibition of movies was only one of many possible entertainment uses of the facility, with others including live, vaudeville-type stage shows.<sup>27</sup>

The highest concentration of these colossal theaters in the country (with the sole exception of New York's Broadway) was found in downtown Dallas, about six miles to the south of what would become NorthPark Center.<sup>28</sup> Known as "Theater Row," the area around Elm and Main streets was packed with at least twenty of these palaces between 1920 and

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<sup>24</sup> Balio, 111.

<sup>25</sup> The term "support industries" refers to a large group of businesses that provide services to the film exhibition industry. These include, but are not limited to, those involved in film transport, projector repair, theater cleaning, and concession suppliers, many of which have established Dallas as their base of operation.

<sup>26</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 48.

<sup>27</sup> Schroeder, 64.

<sup>28</sup> Sherrod, 21.

1950 (picture from the 1940s shown on the next page).<sup>29</sup> These theaters included the famous Rialto, Tower, and Hippodrome as well as two “super palaces,” the Palace and Majestic.<sup>30</sup> This constellation of theaters was most likely located here because of the easy access that was provided by the streetcar lines that ran down Elm Street. These trolleys not only provided a means for people to get from their outlying homes to downtown, but they



Figure 1 - Dallas Theater Row Circa 1948

also proved to be an efficient way of being able to transport moviegoers from theater to theater once they were in the area.<sup>31</sup>

The cinemas of the 1920s and 1930s were so spectacular in fact that they served as the primary and sometimes sole attraction for their patrons.<sup>32</sup> As such, theaters themselves were often the intended destination regardless of what film was showing at the time (an issue which only intensified as theaters began to be some of the first buildings in their

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<sup>29</sup> Lovita Irby, *Preservationdallas.org*, last modified 2015, accessed February 18, 2015, <http://www.preservationdallas.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/IST-070-DallasRowNight-copy-1280x855.jpg>.

<sup>30</sup> Schroeder, 58.

<sup>31</sup> Ephemeral Dallas, "The Majestic Theater and Elm Street," last modified 2015, accessed February 23, 2015, <http://ephemeraldallas.blogspot.com/2010/11/majestic-theater-and-elm-street.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 55.

respective cities to install air conditioning).<sup>33</sup> It is for this reason that one of the biggest moguls in film exhibition at the time, Marcus Loew of Loew's Theaters, famously remarked, "We sell tickets to theaters, not to pictures."<sup>34</sup>

This idea of selling the theater and not the movies in the palace era is one of the main distinctions between the generations that came before and after it. One example of this in practice is in the experience of Ann Duncan, a woman involved in restoring an old palace, the Tampa Theater, in Tampa, Florida, because of her love of the building. When asked to name one film that she had seen at this theater that she had dedicated her life to, she could not think of a single one. Her husband, Lee, finally interjected on her behalf that "It wasn't the movies . . . everyone went there because it was the place to go."<sup>35</sup>

When viewed in this manner, the generation of palaces was not, as Gomery argued, the high point in the history of how movies were exhibited. If Marcus Loew and Ann Duncan are correct, the function of the films during this time was to provide background entertainment to patrons who had already bought a ticket to the theater. While it is true that the post-palace theaters were aesthetically simplistic (NorthPark is certainly no exception to this), the patrons continued to pack the auditoriums in order to see the movies, no longer lured there by an ornate venue.

#### *Notes on Form and Structure*

In presenting the history of the third generation of movie exhibition using the methodology of the new cinema history movement, this thesis will argue that the "movie generation" should be viewed as a time when the films were the only attraction and motivating force for the survival of the industry. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the Cinemas at NorthPark was the representation of the ideal theater of this period—a facility

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<sup>33</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> Ina Rae Hark, *Exhibition: The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 6.

<sup>35</sup> Janna Jones, *The Southern Movie Palace* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), 234.

with the primary purpose of showing movies in the best way possible while actively removing anything in the theater that distracted from that purpose.

This thesis is organized into seven chapters. The first chapter has introduced the background of the movie industry and Dallas and has discussed the first and second generation theaters. Chapter two looks at the planning and creation of the Cinemas at NorthPark, including the decisions that led to its location. The remaining chapters are broken up temporally rather than thematically in order to better highlight the shifts that were occurring in the film exhibition industry.

Over the last fifty years, the midpoint of each decade has brought major changes to how movies theaters are built and operated. Over this period, the average useful life of a movie theater as it was built was less than fifteen years. In that fifteen-year window, most theaters have either closed or greatly modified their operation (changing to a dollar or genre theater and splitting big auditoriums into smaller ones are considered a modified operation; ownership changes and aesthetic remodels are not). The NorthPark I & II remained open for thirty-three years, over twice as long as the other theaters of the era, without any major modifications. The next four chapters study the theater in ten-year intervals beginning at these mid-decade points. The third chapter covers 1965-1975, a period where multiscreen suburban theaters were introduced and eventually replaced the downtown single screens. Chapter four looks at 1975-1985, a time where saturation booking put movies on more screens than ever before. Chapter five covers 1985-1995, a time of massive renovations and rebuilding as film distributors began buying up theater chains. Chapter six explores the last three years of NorthPark's operation, 1995-1998. Though this last chapter only covers a short period of time, it was one of such great change with the introduction of the megaplex that the venerable theater was forced to close. The final chapter will summarize and provide a modern context for the work. Since chapters three through six cover the years that the theater was open for the public, a list of movies that were advertised for the public are

included at the end of every chapter. In addition to this list, there is a chart of all other competing theaters in Dallas during that period. A colored bar denotes a theater that is operating in the same manner as it did when it opened, and a bar with hash marks denotes a theater that is open but has either modified its programming (such as becoming a dollar theater) or has added screens.

A note on spelling: given that the word “theater” varies between “-er” and “-re” this thesis has standardized to “-er” for all uses of the word unless it is used in the official name of a cinema (for example, “The Majestic Theatre”).



## Chapter 2

### Why A Twin For NorthPark?

Growth was concentrating on the north side . . . the changes also included a dramatic shift in the shopping habits of residents of enormous consequences for downtown. Enclosed, air-conditioned retail malls such as NorthPark now provided attractive alternatives to downtown shopping. Soon after its 1965 opening, NorthPark began hosting more shoppers on a typical day than the entire downtown area.

—Darwin Payne<sup>36</sup>

When the General Cinema NorthPark I & II opened to the public, customers were given a promotional pamphlet (reproduced on the following page) with the heading “Why A Twin For NorthPark?”.<sup>37</sup> At the time, there had been no other twin theaters in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, so marketing materials were created that highlighted this aspect of the new theater as something unique and different.

Although two auditoriums under a single roof was the focal point of the advertising, it was only one of four major factors that must be examined in order to answer the question “Why a twin for NorthPark?” These factors are 1) population migration to the North Dallas region (including the construction of Central Expressway); 2) the creation of NorthPark Center as a regional shopping hub; 3) industrial and economic changes within the cinema industry; and 4) the growth of the General Cinema Corporation as it became one of the leading cinema chains in the country. Together, these four factors created the proper environment for this theater to be built at NorthPark Center and to expand beyond the single screen-only design that had been commonplace heretofore.

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<sup>36</sup> Darwin Payne, *Big D: Triumphs and Troubles of an American Supercity in the 20th Century* (Dallas, TX: Three Forks Press, 2000), 372.

<sup>37</sup> “Why A Twin For NorthPark?” brochure, 1965, Ron Beardmore Collection.

# *Why A Twin For NorthPark?*

From its very inception, NorthPark was conceived and developed by Mr. Raymond D. Nasher, to represent the ultimate in comfort, convenience and diversity to the people of the Dallas area. General Cinema Corporation, the nation's leading proponent and developer of shopping center theatres, enthusiastically accepted the challenge to design and operate a theatre that would be a worthy addition to this giant shopping center complex.

Cinema I & II at NorthPark is the result.

Patron convenience is the keynote to this exciting new concept in motion picture entertainment. The duplicated facilities of a twin, including rest rooms, drinking fountains and dual cashiers, permit the elimination of waiting lines. Staggered scheduling reduces traffic congestion and provides free parking closer to the theatre since everyone is not coming or leaving at the same time.

A twin by virtue of its dual auditoriums, can present films to audiences of varied taste by presenting a family film in one auditorium while catering to a mature audience in the other. Similarly, a foreign film — or so called “art type” — can be offered in one auditorium with a conventional Hollywood production scheduled for the screen in the other unit. An additional advantage is the ability of a twin to present a road show attraction which may be scheduled for several months, while the other auditorium is presenting new films at regular intervals thus accommodating those persons who want to come back soon.

Yes, we of General Cinema are proud of Cinema I & II and feel that we have successfully met the challenge of providing a facility that will be a worthy addition to the “Wonderful World of NorthPark”.

We sincerely hope that you agree and invite you to make Cinema I & II your favorite source of motion picture entertainment.

Figure 2 - Opening Day Promotional Brochure

### *Population Migration*

The first major factor that led to the building of a twin at NorthPark Center was the migration of people to the suburban areas, specifically to northern Dallas. Throughout the 1950s, the city of Dallas was growing outward, with emphasis on northern expansion. The raw data from the 1950, 1960, and 1970 censuses demonstrate, using real population numbers, the deterioration of downtown as a residential locus and the expansion of tracts along the new Central Expressway roadway. For this comparison, nine tracts from the downtown area closest to Theatre Row and the nine tracts from the North Dallas area that are closest to NorthPark Center were selected and compared to chart the movement of people throughout the years of NorthPark's design, construction, and opening.

In the 1950 census, the collective population of the nine selected tracts in the downtown area was 55,687, with a demographic makeup of 62% white and 38% non-white (this is the term that was used in the census).<sup>38</sup> For the North Dallas sample,<sup>39</sup> the cumulative population came to 38,304, with a demographic split of 97.7% white and 2.3% non-white.<sup>40</sup>

By the time of the 1960 census, the downtown population had shrunk to 40,642 (a decrease of 27%), while the demographics remained almost unchanged (60% white and 40% non-white). The area around what would become NorthPark Center swelled from 38,304 in 1950 to 46,924 in 1960 (an increase of 22.5%) with racial division of 92% white and 8% non-white.<sup>41</sup> This increase does not directly correspond to the loss from downtown since the population was dispersing from the city center to tracts other than just the nine selected for analysis, but it does show that the area was growing at a rapid pace.

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<sup>38</sup> The downtown tracts selected for study were 15, 16, 17, 21, 22, 30, 31, 32, and 33.

<sup>39</sup> The North Dallas tracts selected for study were D-1, D-2, D-3, 3, 75, 76, 77, 78, and 79.

<sup>40</sup> United States Census Bureau, *Census of Population and Housing, 1950; Census and Population Vol. III, 1950*, accessed October 1, 2014, <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of Population and Housing, 1960; Census of Population Vol 1. Characteristics of the Population; Texas, 1960*, accessed October 1, 2014, <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

The 1970 census shows even more decline downtown, with the total population reduced to 28,531 and a demographic makeup 57% white and 43% non-white. This represented a reduction of 30% from the previous census and a total contraction of 49% over the twenty-year period. In the same span of time, the North Dallas tracts expanded to a total of 69,802 with a demographic split of 95% white and 5% non-white. This was an increase of 49% and a total population increase of 82% over the twenty-year span.<sup>42</sup>

During this period, there was a general conception that downtown had become noisy, dirty, and chaotic.<sup>43</sup> In addition to these concerns, more automobiles were attempting to get downtown without enough parking places to accommodate them.<sup>44</sup> This environment was devastating to the downtown theaters that started to see steady closings as early as 1952. By 1973, the demand for films in the area had dipped so low that the last remaining downtown palace, The Majestic, was forced to close.<sup>45</sup>

The creation of Central Expressway as a convenient and direct roadway to the suburbs is likely what led the migrating citizens to prefer moving northward when leaving downtown. Planning for this highway began back in the 1940s and was to follow the old railway routes after clearance of right-of-way was agreed on with the Southern Pacific, Santa Fe, and M-K-T lines. Once secured, the construction would continue in stages as it moved northward, starting with overpasses across Ross and Hall Street, then a section to Mockingbird Lane, and finally an extension to Northwest Highway. This section, however, was only planned to be a parkway of “two thirty-two-foot streets with 125 feet of parkway between” with plans to “construct an expressway in that parkway when traffic justifies.”<sup>46</sup> The conversion of this stretch to an expressway that connected to Northwest Highway was

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<sup>42</sup> United States Census Bureau, *1970 Census of Population and Housing, 1970; Vol 1: Characteristics of the Population*, accessed October 1, 2014, <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

<sup>43</sup> M. Jeffery Hardwick, *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 152.

<sup>44</sup> M Hardwick, 181.

<sup>45</sup> Sherrod, 47.

<sup>46</sup> “Book Sketches Central Route,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 25, 1946, sec. 2, p.1.

justified fairly quickly, and by April of 1952, the Northwest Highway extension was completed and opened to traffic, another clear indication of how rapid this particular area was growing.<sup>47</sup>

### *Raymond Nasher and the Development of NorthPark Center*

As the population of Dallas settled into the northern quarters of the city, traveling into downtown was not only inconvenient, but was considered dangerous by many of the affluent residents. In order to take advantage of this fact, Raymond D. Nasher put together a panel of experts in economics and geography to study the feasibility of a shopping center in the North Dallas region. When this analysis was completed, they selected a site at the corner of Central Expressway and Northwest Highway as the ideal location for his new venture.<sup>48</sup>



Figure 3 - Map of Future NorthPark Center Site from the 1948 Dallas City Planning Commission

<sup>47</sup> Jim Stephenson, "New Expressway Opens with Rush," *Dallas Morning News*, April 16, 1952, part III, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Al Altwegg, "NorthPark Planned as Biggest in the West," *Dallas Morning News*, January 1, 1962, sec.1, p.7.

At the time, the Hillcrest Memorial Cemetery owned the site (as can be seen in the 1948 Planning Commission map) and would need to be cleared for construction. By 1962, the eventual Central Expressway route was completed through this region and it was decided that it would curve and head north, following Coit Road instead of the rail lines.

In 1961, Raymond Nasher negotiated a deal with the Hillcrest Foundation that owned the Memorial Cemetery to lease 305 acres for the development of NorthPark Center. The leased land extended much farther to the west than the mall needed and according to the contract is “bounded at the northwest corner of Northwest Highway and Central Expressway, bounded by Walnut Hill Lane on the north and Hillcrest Road on the west, excluding Temple Emanu-El and the Hillcrest Memorial Park.<sup>49</sup> For this 99-year ground lease, the Hillcrest Foundation would receive an estimated \$50 million over the term, to be used for charitable and educational purposes.<sup>50</sup>

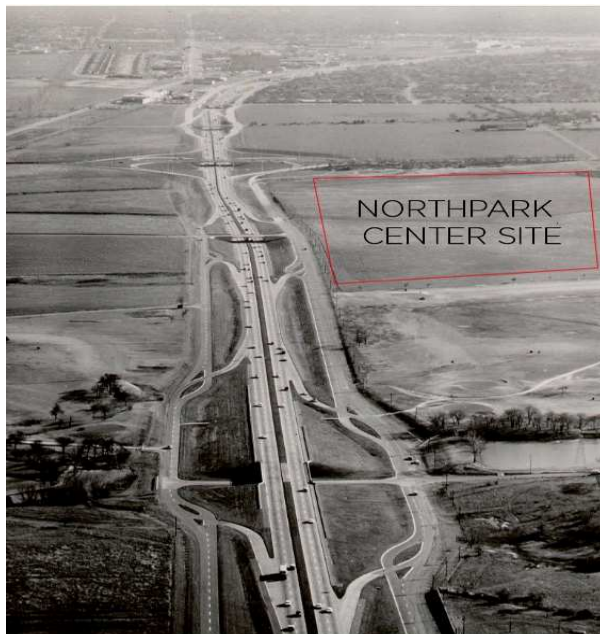


Figure 4 - 1959 Southern-Facing Aerial View from [www.texasfreeway.com](http://www.texasfreeway.com)

<sup>49</sup> “N-M Has NorthPark Store,” *Dallas Morning News*, July 4, 1965, sec. A, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> “Site Selection Took Three Years,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 11, 1966, sec. F, p. 9.

Figure 4, from 1959, demonstrates that six years prior to the opening of NorthPark Center (when much of the design and planning was taking place), the North Dallas region was more or less a rural area with no housing, retail, or industrial development whatsoever. Nasher's survey team determined that not only was this area primed for a population boom (they expected 1,200,000 people to be living within the trade area by 1975), but that the aggregate income of these residents would equal approximately \$2.6 billion annually.<sup>51</sup>



Figure 5 - Aerial Photo of NorthPark Center 1965

After a brief construction strike in early 1965, NorthPark Center finally held its formal opening to the public on August 19, 1965, when almost 100 stores, shops, and restaurants began doing business in what was called the “largest climate-controlled suburban shopping complex in the world.”<sup>52</sup> The theater, however, would have to wait almost another month before being ready to receive visitors. Figure 5 shows NorthPark Center right around the

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<sup>51</sup> “Site Selection Took Three Years,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 11, 1966, sec. F, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> “N-M Has NorthPark Store,” *Dallas Morning News*, July 4, 1965, sec. A, p. 6.



time of the opening in 1965. It is interesting to note that there are still no other residential or commercial developments at this time and that the surrounding area remains almost unchanged from the 1959 photo. The theater is located directly across from the intersection of the two wings, but unconnected to the main shopping concourse.

### *Changes in the Movie Industry*

The years preceding the opening of the Cinemas at NorthPark were hard on the exhibition industry as a whole, with a low point occurring in 1962. This period saw major reductions in box office gross, number of tickets sold, and overall profit.<sup>53</sup> There are some commonly discussed factors that led to the “bottoming out” of the industry during this period. First, broadcast television was rapidly displacing the movie theater as the dominant entertainment medium in the United States. Second, soon after the end of World War II, large numbers of adults were getting married, having children, and moving to the suburbs, where there were not a large number of theaters.<sup>54</sup> Though these were important, it is impossible to ignore the influence that the Paramount Decrees had on attendance numbers dropping over 70% in just fourteen years.

The Paramount Decrees have been the subject of numerous books and dissertations that provide a great amount of detail on how these came about and the effects that they had on the movie exhibition industry. A thorough analysis is not necessary here, but there were three aspects of these decrees that had a direct effect on the Cinemas at NorthPark and as such need to be discussed here.<sup>55</sup>

The first aspect to understand is that the term “Paramount Decrees” (which got this name because Paramount Pictures was the first company to comply) refers to a Supreme

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<sup>53</sup> Gary Richard Edgerton, “American Film Exhibition and an Analysis of the Motion Picture Industry’s Market Structure, 1963-1980” (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, 1981), p.28.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Lev, *Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003), 7.

<sup>55</sup> Readings include *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry* by Michael Conant, “United States versus Hollywood: The Case Study of an Antitrust Suit” by Ernest Bornerman, and the chapter “The Decline of an Institution” in *Film - The Democratic Art: A Social History of American Film* by Garth Jowett.



Court decision that forced the production and exhibition tiers of the movie industry to be owned by separate entities. Prior to these decrees, a practice of “vertical integration” existed where a distribution company would own a theater circuit. This was considered to be a monopolistic practice by the court and the order to separate was handed down on May 3, 1948.<sup>56</sup>

Table 1 - Box Office Admissions and Gross after the Paramount Decrees

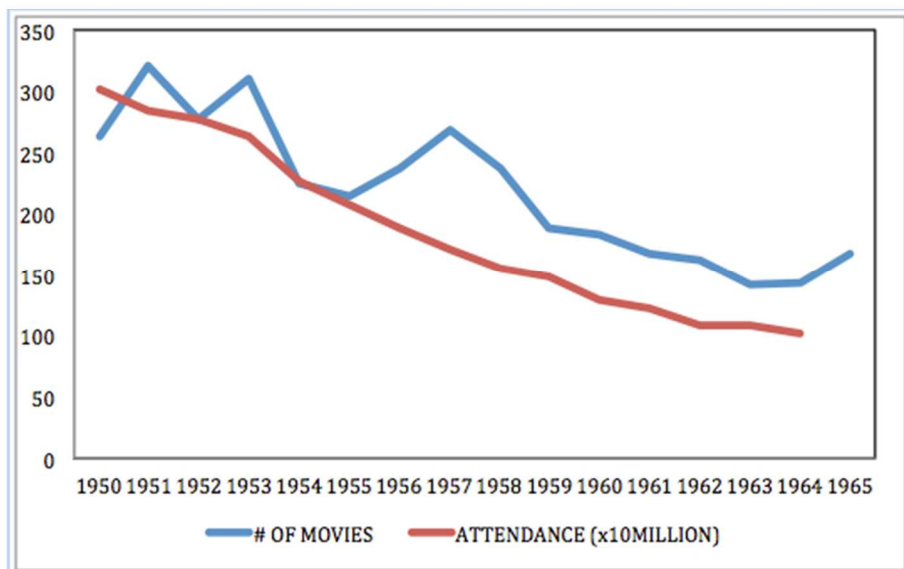
	U.S. Box Office Gross (Millions)	Avg. Admis- sion Price	Number of Admissions (Millions)	(Millions) Motion Picture Industry Corporate Profits	
				Before Taxes	After Taxes
1948	1,506	\$.44	3,442.7	142	71
1949	1,448	.457	3,168.5	128	69
1950	1,379	.457	3,017.5	112	60
1951	1,332	.469	2,840.2	101	42
1952	1,325	.477	2,777.7	84	33
1953	1,339	.509	2,630.3	80	35
1954	1,251	.551	2,270.4	136	71
1955	1,204	.581	2,072.3	124	61
1956	1,125	.594	1,893.9	89	30
1957	1,078	.624	1,727.6	55	16
1958	1,010	.65	1,553.8	15	-19
1959	1,006	.676	1,488.2	44	0
1960	948.4	.727	1,304.3	49	1
1961	945.4	.772	1,224.2	23	-47
1962	874.9	.81	1,080.1	6	-47
1963	925.0	.846	1,093.4	19	-33
1964	947.6	.925	1,024.4	86	22

<sup>56</sup> Jowett, 345.

The second important factor is that although 1948 was the year of the Supreme Court decision, full compliance did not occur until March 12th of 1959 when Loew's Theatres negotiated the separation of its theaters from MGM studios.<sup>57</sup> This meant that the effects of the decision were spread out over a decade and did not have an immediate impact on the films or the attendance numbers. Table 1 charts the gradual reduction in attendance and profit beginning in 1949.

The third point is the repercussion of divorcement, which meant the production tier was no longer supported directly by the exhibition side of the industry. The theaters' cash flow came from direct sales to the consumer of both tickets and concessions. This is important as it makes for a much more immediate return on investment for the movie exhibitor. The production side was investing money on product that they would not see a return on for at least a year and in some cases more (depending on the final release date). The result was a dramatic overall reduction in the number of releases by the major film studios every year and higher rental rates charged to the theaters.<sup>58</sup>

Table 2 - Number of Movies Released and Movie Tickets Sold 1950–1965



<sup>57</sup> Lev, 198.

<sup>58</sup> Lev, 211.

Faced with higher rental rates, fewer films to show, and dwindling audiences, it was clear that the movie business would have to change in order to survive. The first thing to go was the opulent design of the “movie palace.” Exhibitors could no longer afford to be “showman” and provide “palaces” as a place to watch movies. As a result, in the early '60s, the primary focus of the theater chains was to provide a simple, comfortable environment that promoted the sale of tickets and concessions with the lowest overhead possible.<sup>59</sup>

The concept of “multiplexing” (multiple theater auditoriums in the same building) was a direct result of this movement to lower costs.<sup>60</sup> The twin was the first incarnation of the multiplex and was defined by theatre architect Robert W. Kahn as:

Two auditoriums, one large and one small, share common lobby, rest room, concession, and mechanical facilities. The operator can shift features at the proper time to adjust demand, using the smaller house as the run nears its end; or he can use the smaller house for art films, re-runs, theatre parties, or special occasions.<sup>61</sup>

Other benefits to this concept included eliminating redundant staffing, a single projection booth, and a shared parking lot. Because of these cost savings, the multiplex (specifically the twin) allowed for a much needed period of rebuilding and growth. This growth was enjoyed by two new players in the market that were not part of the old vertically integrated system. These new chains were known as American Multi-Cinema and the General Cinema Corporation.

#### *The General Cinema Corporation Comes to Town*

The fourth factor that helps answer the question “Why a Twin for NorthPark?” is the role of the General Cinema Corporation (commonly known as GCC) as they shifted from being a leader in the drive-in theater market towards adapting a more traditional “four wall” business model.

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<sup>59</sup> Edgerton, 151.

<sup>60</sup> Edgerton, 48.

<sup>61</sup> Edgerton, 127.

Two years before the NorthPark I & II opened, drive-in theatres were already in decline, with the total number of drive-ins falling from 4,700 in 1958 down to 3,502 in 1963.<sup>62</sup> The biggest reason for this decline was that as shopping centers and malls became popular, retail and residential developers were appropriating land that would have otherwise gone to a sprawling drive-in that could hold several hundred cars. This caused a spike in land costs overall, making it more difficult to profit from a drive-in.<sup>63</sup>

In 1961, the owner of the General Drive-In Corporation, Philip Smith, died leaving the business to his son Richard. Richard A. Smith was a thirty-six year old Harvard graduate who saw the decline of the drive-in at the same time as the rise of shopping centers.<sup>64</sup> In reaction to this, Richard began to de-emphasize the company's reliance on the open-air cinemas and turned its focus to "hard top" locations. It was at this time that he chose to change the name of the company to "General Cinema Corporation" in order to reflect this new approach.<sup>65</sup>

It was not General Cinema, but its primary competitor American Multi-Cinema (commonly known as AMC) that is credited with beginning the multiplex trend when the Parkway I & II opened as the first purpose-built twin in the U.S. on July 12, 1963, in Kansas City, Missouri.<sup>66</sup> Before this opening, GCC was already working on a multiplex concept of its own by adding a second auditorium to some of their existing locations. GCC's first purpose-built twin opened on November 6, 1963, at the Charlottetown Mall in Charlotte, North Carolina. This theater (located at the top of the picture on the next page) would serve as a model for future GCC twins, including the Cinemas at NorthPark.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Edgerton, 35.

<sup>63</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 93.

<sup>64</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 96.

<sup>65</sup> Bettye H. Pruitt, *The Making of Harcourt General: A History of Growth through Diversification, 1922-1992* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1994), 59.

<sup>66</sup> Christofer Meissner, "Six Screens for Suburbia: The Rise of the Multiplex Movie Theatre in Kansas City and the Transformation of American Film Exhibition, 1963-1980" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 2004), 21.

<sup>67</sup> Bp2.blogger.com, "Charlottetown Mall Aerial Photo," last modified 2015, accessed February 18, 2015, [http://bp2.blogger.com/\\_FbxZe2T4Ylo/RvyGFJtco3I/AAAAAAAAAs0/WQ\\_olGnsJzc/s1600-h/31404.jpg](http://bp2.blogger.com/_FbxZe2T4Ylo/RvyGFJtco3I/AAAAAAAAAs0/WQ_olGnsJzc/s1600-h/31404.jpg).



Figure 6 - Charlottetown Mall

The push from General Cinema and AMC towards multiplexing and cost-cutting has often been looked at as having a negative impact on the movie-going experience. Due to the fact that the movie industry was on the verge of outright collapse, it is important to see these changes not as a negative, but as an imperative. The austere approach that both AMC and GCC employed in creating the twin cinema is one of the main reasons why the exhibition industry was able to recover from the record low numbers that followed the post-Paramount Decree divestiture.<sup>68</sup> Without the “bottoming out” that necessitated this new and innovative approach, there never would have been a twin built at NorthPark Center.

*Functionality over Aesthetics: Designing the NorthPark*

It is often assumed that William Reisman designed the Cinemas at NorthPark. As part of its corporate plan, General Cinema wanted a repeatable and familiar design for all of

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<sup>68</sup> Edgerton, 36.

their new shopping center theaters. The company liked his focus on simplicity and comfort as well as his innovative “shadow box” screen frame that eliminated all of the curtains and drapery from the auditorium.<sup>69</sup> Reisman also favored a floor plan that put a theater on either side of the lobby with the larger auditorium always to the left of a patron walking in the front door (see previous picture of the Charlottetown Mall).

Despite the fact that William Reisman’s ideas were clearly being used in the creation of this theater, Raymond Nasher wanted the same architect that he was using for the rest of NorthPark Center to be employed by the theater. As such, the building was officially designed by the Harrell and Hamilton architectural firm of Dallas.<sup>70</sup> In doing this, Nasher was able to maintain the same aesthetic standard used in the rest of the buildings in the complex, which included the same iconic beige bricks.

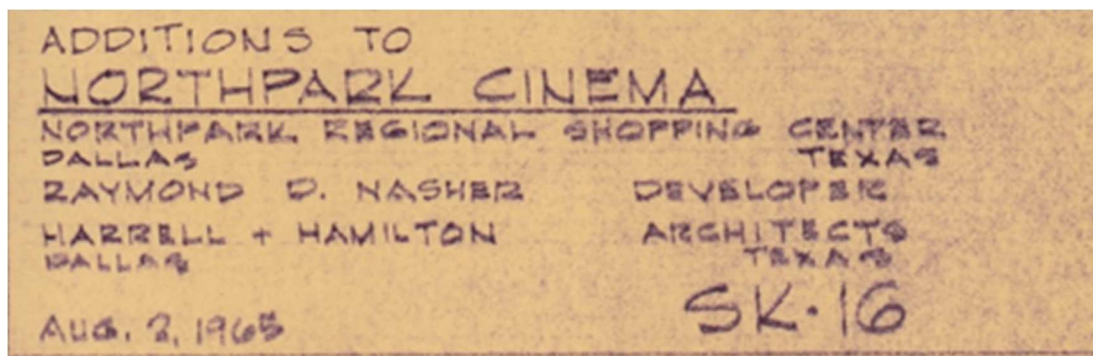


Figure 7 - Scan from Original Blueprint

It is impossible to verify at this point how much influence General Cinema and William Reisman had over Harrell and Hamilton in the design of the Cinemas at NorthPark. Given that the interior and function of the theater were identical to a Reisman design, it is probable that Reisman directed Nasher’s architects in all aspects beyond the exterior shell.

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<sup>69</sup> Pruitt, 60.

<sup>70</sup> “Additions to NorthPark Cinema,” blueprint, 1965, in author’s possession.



Part of Reisman's goal as a designer was to eliminate the grandiose elements throughout the entire customer experience and to make the films that were showing their only focus.

In contrast to the curbside box office and cavernous spaces that were common in earlier theaters, a night out at this particular theater was somewhat of a chore for the moviegoer. The theater itself was tucked away behind NorthPark Center, completely hiding it from Northwest Highway and Interstate 75, the two main thoroughfares that marked the mall's boundaries. Furthermore, unlike the previous movie palaces that people were used to, the NorthPark possessed no brightly lit marquee that announced either its location or the movies that it was playing.<sup>71</sup>



Figure 8 - NorthPark Cinema I & II Exterior

Once customers found the theater, all they saw was a small, non-descript beige brick building which was only identified as their destination by way of a backlit sign that simply read "I CINEMA II." After parking (the easy part, as NorthPark proudly offered "free parking for 6,000 cars"<sup>72</sup>), the customer would then wait in one line leading to the exterior box office in order to purchase tickets before proceeding to a second outside line since there

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<sup>71</sup> Film-tech.com, "General Cinema NorthPark West 1&2," last modified 2015, accessed February 18, 2015, <http://www.film-tech.com/warehouse/pics/gccnpw/gccnpw.html>.

<sup>72</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, September 22, 1965, sec. A, p. 15.

was not enough room in the lobby to hold the people coming to the shows. Once in this line, the moviegoer would wait, sometimes for hours, for the ushers to open the doors that led to the theater's diminutive interior.

Unlike most theaters built after the advent of the concession stand, the entrances to the auditoriums were the first thing the customers would pass, not the food counter. This was highly unusual; since popcorn and soda sales provide the bulk of an exhibitor's profit, most theater chains position the concession stand in such a way that it is impossible for patrons to get to their films without passing by at least one.<sup>73</sup>

The auditoriums, which were practically identical except for size, were perhaps the greatest shock of all to those accustomed to the beautiful atmospheric theaters built in the preceding decades. At NorthPark, they were simply large rooms that contained rows of seats on a sloped floor with no balcony, a projector in the back of the room, and a screen in the front (much like the days of the first generation Nickelodeons). Furthermore, the rooms were completely lacking in curtains. This is another stark contrast to earlier theatres as they used curtains, both on the walls or surrounding the screen, as a decoration standard.



Figure 9 - NorthPark Cinema I Interior

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<sup>73</sup> Polk, 40.



The view of the multiscreen theaters put forth by Gomery would argue that considering all of the above qualities, NorthPark was a sterile and unwelcoming environment for the viewing of films. There is, however, another view on this issue which was put forth by spectatorship theorist Harry Alan Potamkin. This theory argues that these qualities represent an improvement on the entire movie-watching experience (again, as opposed to “cinema-going”). As one of the first real movie critics, Potamkin reviewed films during the 1920s and 1930s, gaining an international reputation for his unusual acuity of judgment and his devotion to cinema as an art form and not a commodity.<sup>74</sup> Potamkin’s love for cinema did not extend to the theaters in which this art was being presented.

The theaters in which he worked as a critic were the aforementioned palace theaters. They were the great ornate structures that conveyed opulence and importance from their mighty outdoor marquees, through their chandelier-lit lobbies, all the way down to their carefully chosen names which further conveyed the greatness of these new venues (names such as “Palace,” “Majestic,” and “Empire”).<sup>75</sup> In an essay written for the *National Board of Review Magazine* entitled “The Ritual of the Movies,”<sup>76</sup> Potamkin attacked these theaters for the harmful effects they were having on films. He argued that so-called “amenities” such as stage shows, overly ornate restroom facilities, ever present ushers, and dish giveaways distracted the viewer from the art of the film.<sup>77</sup>

Potamkin did offer a solution to this problem by laying out the specifications for a new type of theater. In another article, entitled “The Movie Palace,” he combined the attributes of existing theaters with some suggestions of previous writers in order to describe what he envisioned as the perfect theater.<sup>78</sup> As Potamkin had no training in architecture, he

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<sup>74</sup> Harry Alan Potamkin, *The Compound Cinema: The Film Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Teachers College Press, 1977), inside cover flap.

<sup>75</sup> Kathryn Helgesen Fuller, “At the Picture Show,” in *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, ed. Ina Rae Hark (New York: Routledge, 2002), 43.

<sup>76</sup> Potamkin, 217.

<sup>77</sup> Potamkin, 216-217.

<sup>78</sup> Potamkin, 548.

did not “design” a theater per se; instead he examined four problems within the accepted palace theater design and offered solutions for each.

First, he pointed out that the theatres were being built around the proscenium (the large, decorative arch that marks the boundary between the stage area and auditorium of a theater) with the screen positioned behind it. Feeling that this was providing a distraction from the screen and the film playing on it, he argued that the proscenium should simply be abolished and that the screen should be hung flat against the wall.<sup>79</sup>

Second, he felt that the ideal cinema should eliminate the chandelier as the lobby’s focal point and substitute “dimmed wall or alcove lighting.”<sup>80</sup> Potamkin’s third point addressed the overall interior of the auditorium and argued for a design that he termed “the convergence of the lines to the screen.” Applied in conjunction with the removal of the proscenium, this idea focused on the removal of all items from the viewing room that were not necessary to the spectatorship of a film, which included the orchestra pit, boxed seats, decorative columns, and balconies.<sup>81</sup> When completed, these modifications would create an auditorium that resembled the shape of a widened triangle with the screen at its apex.

Lastly, Potamkin argued that the owners and managers of these cinemas must consciously realize the differences between a “cinema” and “theatre.”<sup>82</sup> This point transcends any physical limitations of a building and addresses the way in which the building is to be utilized. In order to effectively divorce the cinema from a theater, Potamkin argues that these new auditoriums must be dedicated to the “best possible exploration of pictures,” while leaving the “polyglot program . . . of ballet, fashion shows, vaudeville acts—with a mere soupçon of film entertainment” behind.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Potamkin, 549.

<sup>81</sup> Potamkin, 548.

<sup>82</sup> Potamkin, 549.

<sup>83</sup> Potamkin, 550.

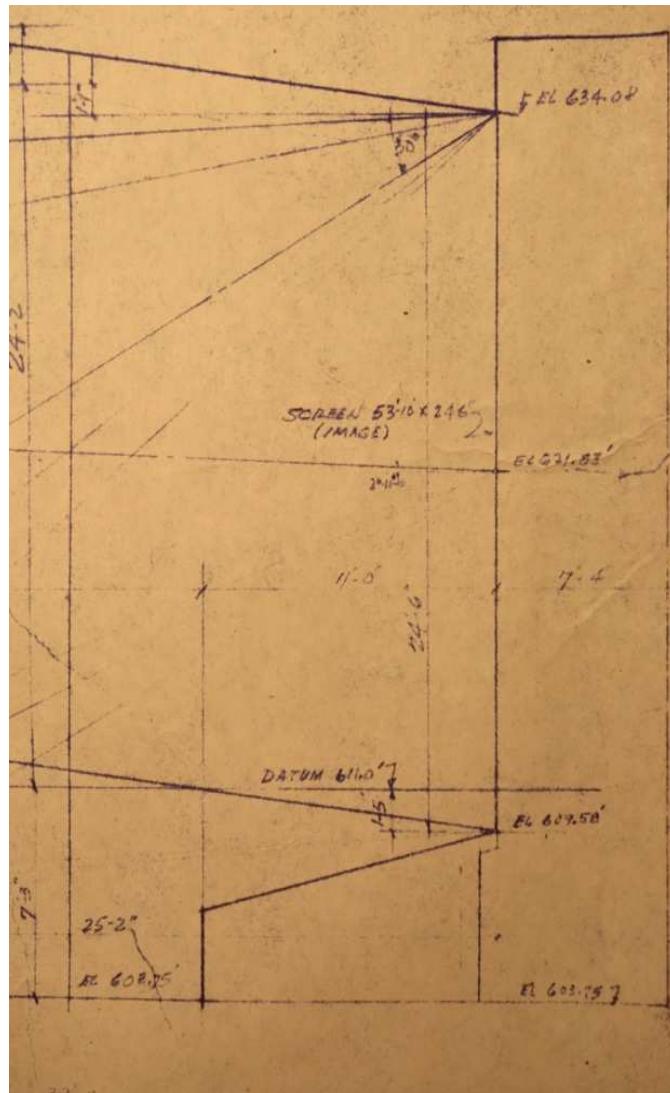


Figure 10 - Blueprint Design of Cinema I Shadowbox

The influence of Potamkin on this new generation of theater construction cannot be dismissed when examining the architecture of the Cinemas at NorthPark. This theater was clearly built not only to adhere to the ideas set forth in his article "The Movie Palace," but expanded upon them. NorthPark incorporated all five of Potamkin's ideas into its design, including the important abolition of the proscenium, which became standard in all new multiscreen theaters. This cinema, however, took a new approach in addressing this issue and developed what came to be known as a "picture window" or "shadow box" screen frame.

In order to maximize the concept of film-as-art put forth in Potamkin's articles, this "picture window" resembled a gigantic picture frame that was hanging on the wall, giving the audience the feeling that they were truly looking at a large work of art in front of them. The fact that the picture was literally in motion helped to return film to its basic form—the moving picture. This cross-section of the front of the auditorium shows that the screen would be built 7'4" from the back wall (this was to allow for speakers and utilities to be placed behind the screen) and sit about 6' off the ground. On the auditorium side of the screen, an "apron" was built that extended 11' out on the top, bottom, and both sides of the screen at a 110 degree angle from the screen.

The following photos show the differences between a shadow box screen frame and a traditional, proscenium type. Notice how one pulls the viewer into the screen and one is more distracting.



Figure 11 - Example of Proscenium (Fox Theatre, Atlanta)



Figure 12 - Example of a Shadow Box Screen Frame

### *Opening Night*

On September 22, 1965, the theater was ready and a large Grand Opening party was held at the new General Cinema Theater to celebrate its arrival in the city.<sup>84</sup> As part of this effort, the organizers of the event appropriated the glamour of an earlier time in movie exhibition by recreating the experience of an old-time movie premiere. This effort, which included an appearance by one of the biggest motion picture stars of the 1910s and '20s, Francis X. Bushman, was the first chance that the citizens of Dallas had to watch movies in one of these new twin cinemas.<sup>85</sup>

As part of this premiere, a commemorative program which included the aforementioned "Why A Twin For NorthPark?" informational flyer was given to those in attendance. The use of such opening day programs harkens back to the opening of the first

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<sup>84</sup> "A Sound and Picture Miracle of Our Modern Age! Dallas' First Twin Cinema Theatre!" *Dallas Morning News*, September 22, 1965, sec. A, p. 15.

<sup>85</sup> William A. Payne, "General Cinema Head 'Builds' Confidence in Movie Industry," *Dallas Morning News*, September 23, 1965, sec. A, p. 17.

“atmospheric” cinema in Dallas, The Majestic Theatre, which premiered downtown in 1921. The booklets that were handed out for that opening were simply and directly titled, “I Am a New Theater.”<sup>86</sup>

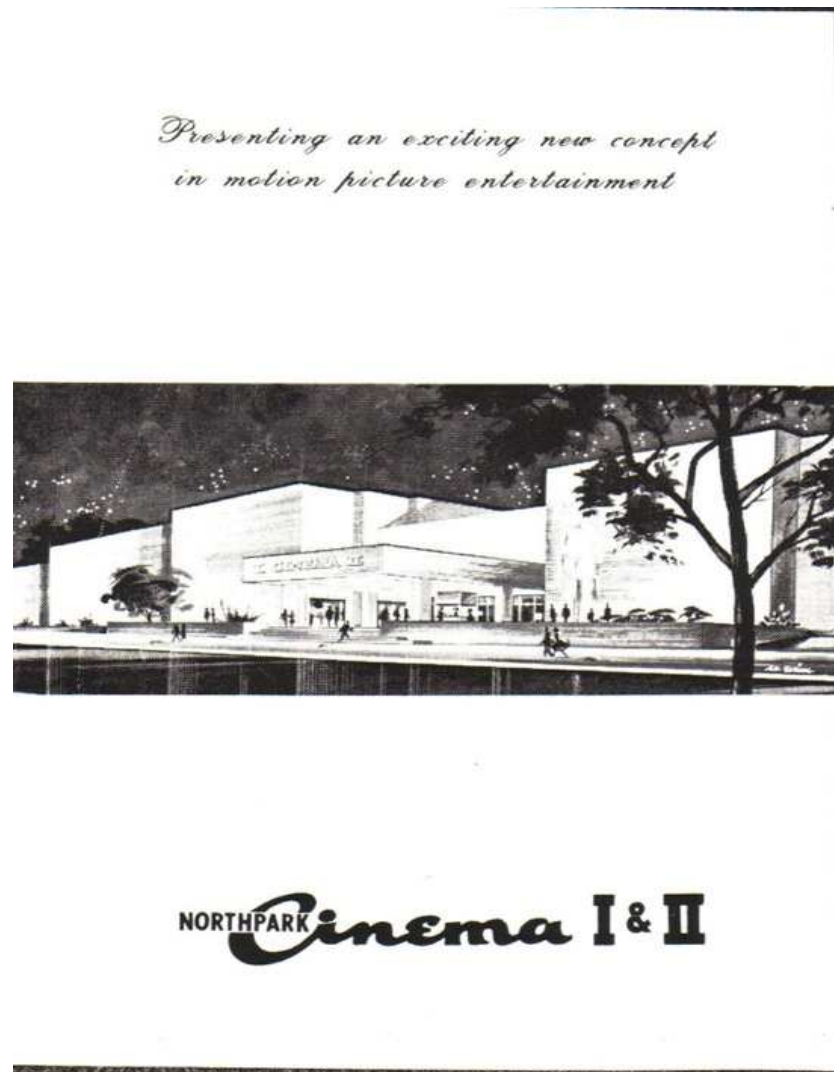


Figure 13 - Cover of Opening Night Brochure

The program for NorthPark’s opening began with a brief history of the new NorthPark retail development and the major players involved, but the bulk of the text was

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<sup>86</sup> Schroeder, 66.

used to educate the customer on new features and services, which ranged from patron comfort and convenience to the differences that a twin theater would have on the types of films that would be shown.<sup>87</sup>

This program amounted to little more than an advertisement, one that worked to sell the concept of a multiscreened neighborhood cinema to a city that had never had one before. Although the multiplex would soon become the standard of movie exhibition, with locations containing more and more screens at a single location, these theaters encountered a large amount of resistance as they moved away from the concentrations of single-screen houses, known as “theatre rows.”<sup>88</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In analyzing the question that was posed in the opening night program, “Why A Twin For NorthPark?”, it is important to understand that there were forces that went beyond why Raymond Nasher and the General Cinema Corporation decided to have two screens at this location instead of one. The question here goes beyond simply examining the number of auditoriums in order to ask the question “Why This Particular Twin For NorthPark?”. This is a much more complex question that goes beyond the financial concerns in order to address why the theater was put on this specific site and designed a certain way. Without being incorporated into the new mall development, these cinemas might have been built further to the south, where theaters such as the Granada, UA Cine, and the Arcadia have come and gone. Furthermore, without the preconditions that existed within the exhibition industry, Dallas’ first twin could have been built with a greater concern put on its aesthetic value, which would have pulled focus away from the movie as an art form.

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<sup>87</sup> “NorthPark Cinema I & II,” brochure, 1965, Ron Beardmore Collection.

<sup>88</sup> Schroeder, 58.

But for over three decades, the Cinemas at NorthPark remained a favorite destination for both critics and audiences alike. The building was located away from downtown, hard to find, and considered to be aesthetically cold. Inside, the lobby and restroom facilities were woefully inadequate, and the auditoriums were little more than giant boxes with a screen in the front. Despite these unconventional factors, the theater continued to succeed while remaining immune to major shifts that occurred in the industry during its operating years. These changes and the effect that they had on Dallas' first third-generation, multiscreen cinema will be discussed in the following chapters.



Chapter 3

From Roadshow to Multiple Run Bookings at NorthPark, 1965–1974

There is every indication that Hollywood will continue producing more and more “roadshow” type pictures, resulting in lengthy engagements. It’s well known that many single auditorium theaters have to bypass these pictures because of their inability to tie up the theater for an appreciable time.<sup>89</sup>

—Richard Smith, President of General Cinema

Figure 14 - Opening Day Newspaper Advertisement

<sup>89</sup> “Curtain Goes Up on Cinema I & II,” *Dallas Times Herald*, September 22, 1965.

The Cinemas at NorthPark finally opened on September 22, 1965, and although the construction strikes earlier in the year had led to a two month delay, the theater still opened as the first multiscreened theater in the city of Dallas.<sup>90</sup> Even more important than the fact that NorthPark maintained this historical distinction, the new twin was also able to keep the films that the General Cinema Corporation had chosen to premiere on the new screens. The careful selection of these films, George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and Vincente Minnelli's *The Sandpiper*, as part of their opening night festivities would prove to be of great importance to the success of the theater over the subsequent decade.<sup>91</sup>

### *Booking Strategies and the Paramount Decrees*

Although the choice of films may seem unimportant, they demonstrate how the Cinemas at NorthPark worked to use changes in national film booking strategies to set a precedent as to how the theater was going to operate from the day that it first opened. To understand how this strategy worked and why the selection of these two films was instrumental to NorthPark's eventual success, it is important to understand the history of film booking as a business prior to 1965.

The previous chapter discussed vertical integration as a business strategy and how the money flowed from the exhibitor through the distributor and to the producer while staying under one synergistic corporate umbrella. This also influenced which movies played at which theaters through a system known as "run-zone-clearance." In this model, the top-tier pictures would open (or "run") at the top-tier theaters all at once. The 1941 Film Daily Year Book accounts for 17,500 total movie theaters in the United States with only 1,360 of these maintaining this top-tier status (most of these located in major metropolitan areas), but

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<sup>90</sup> John Rosenfeld, "The Passing Show: Burton One of Talents That Vibrates and Glows," *Dallas Morning News*, September 19, 1965, sec. D, p. 1.

<sup>91</sup> "A Sound and Picture Miracle for Our Modern Age! Dallas' First Twin Cinema Theatre," *Dallas Morning News*, September 22, 1965, sec. A, p. 15.

although there were so few locations, these theaters accounted for almost one half of all domestic grosses.<sup>92</sup>

Upon completion of the run at these metropolitan palace theaters, the films would undergo a “cooling-off” period where they were pulled from the market and would not be exhibited anywhere. This period would allow “clearance” of time between when they played at these top-tier locations and when they would open at the lesser theaters, which was usually a larger and less exclusive pool of exhibition houses. This pattern would continue to lesser and smaller theaters with lower admission prices. Each distinct level was known as a “zone” and was specifically defined by the type of theater and not necessarily where it was located (“zoning” today refers to distance between theater buildings).

This practice, which became standard in the mid-1920s, continued as normal operating procedure for the major film distributors (known as the “Big Five”) throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, since the arrival of a film at each new zone level was accompanied by a new round of excitement and publicity, this practice seemed to reflect positively on weekly attendance and benefited distributors and exhibitors alike.

After the Paramount Decrees were fully implemented in 1958, theaters were in a more or less adversarial position with their former parent companies, with both sides attempting to maximize their own profits at the expense of the other.<sup>93</sup> With a new dynamic between the supply and exhibition sides of the industry and a significant product shortage, a new booking strategy would be needed.

### *First Runs and Roadshows*

As the first multiscreened theater in the city of Dallas and one of the first in the entire country, the approach that NorthPark took toward their film booking practices had

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<sup>92</sup> Encyclopedia.jrank.org, “The Studio System and the Antitrust Campaign,” last modified 2015, accessed February 6, 2015, <http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/2906/The-Studio-System-and-the-Antitrust-Campaign.html>.

<sup>93</sup> Balio, 404.

ramifications that would extend deep into the industry as a whole. The sort of forethought that this theater undertook was unique, as most of the other multiscreened venues that had already opened around the country demonstrated no discernable strategy when it came to which films they chose to exhibit.

The first purpose-built twin in the United States was the Durwood Parkway One and Parkway Two in Kansas City, Missouri. The idea of twin theaters was not new at this time—outdoor drive-ins had established this model and there were already some older palace theaters that had undergone conversions from single screens to twins (usually by turning the balcony into one auditorium and leaving the floor as its own auditorium). The Parkway Twin receives recognition as the first multiplex simply for the fact that it was the first to be built, from the ground up, for this purpose.

Despite the fact that this theater was a true trendsetter in theater construction, when it came to deciding what movies to play, the Parkway Twin would have been considered a lower-tier theater in the old run-zone-clearance system. The larger house could seat 400 patrons and the smaller could only accommodate 300.<sup>94</sup> It is also interesting to note that while this theater is credited with starting the world-wide phenomenon of building new theaters with multiple screens, it also began a building boom within the city of Kansas City, which had not seen a new theater built for twenty-three years prior to the opening of the Parkway Twin.<sup>95</sup>

The day after its opening, the venerable trade magazine, *Variety*, profiled the theater and specifically discussed Durwood's booking strategy for the new twin. Its approach would be to play the new, popular films in their big auditoriums "day and date" (open the movie at the same time) with their downtown locations. This was a novel approach as it would be the first chance for locations away from the downtown area to play first-run movies. After the

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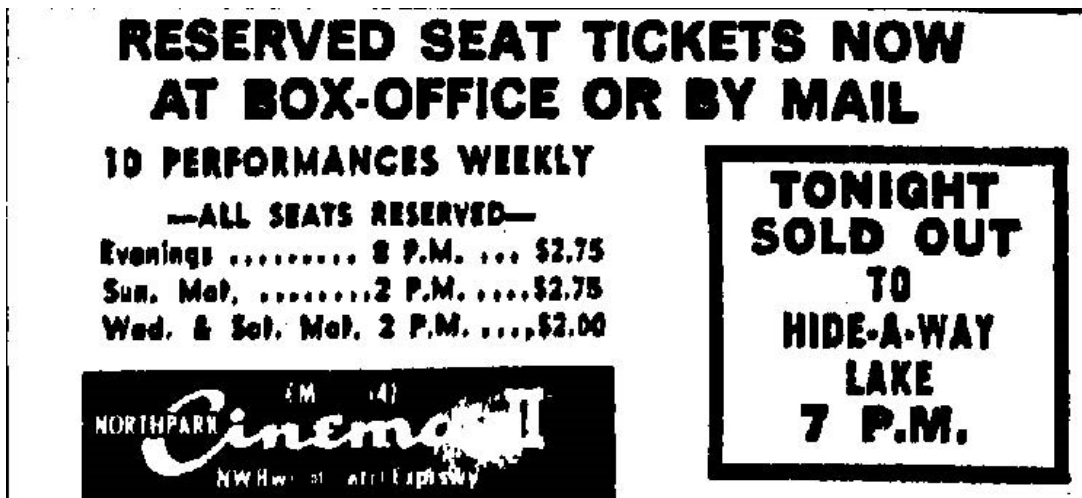
<sup>94</sup> "Angles to Shopping Centre 'Twins': Concession Stands Also Sell to Those Outside the Durwood Situations," *Variety*, July 17, 1963, 15.

<sup>95</sup> "1<sup>st</sup> New Hardtops for K.C. in 23 Years," *Variety*, May 21, 1963, 3.

movie began to taper off, it could be moved out of the main theater at the twin and play out the rest of its run on the smaller screen.<sup>96</sup>

The Cinemas at NorthPark, however, specifically decided to open with *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *The Sandpiper* in order to experiment with the economic feasibility of a twin cinema combining a first-run theater (similar concept to the top-tier of the run-zone-clearance system where they would have some amount of exclusivity on their movies) with a new innovation in film booking known as the “roadshow.”<sup>97</sup>

The idea of “roadshowing” a film was not completely new to the 1960s. In the early days of movie exhibition in this country, small movie producers rented out auditoriums as they moved from city to city during the 1920s.<sup>98</sup> Since these producers were taking a film “on the road,” they not only provided this booking strategy with a name, but also created a sense of exclusivity in their product due to its itinerant nature. The roadshow of the 1960s, however, took this idea of exclusivity further than its predecessor, incorporating techniques used by live theater venues in order to create a unique movie-going experience.<sup>99</sup>



**RESERVED SEAT TICKETS NOW  
AT BOX-OFFICE OR BY MAIL**

**10 PERFORMANCES WEEKLY**  
**—ALL SEATS RESERVED—**

Evenings ..... 8 P.M. ... \$2.75  
Sun. Mat. .... 2 P.M. .... \$2.75  
Wed. & Sat. Mat. 2 P.M. .... \$2.00

**TONIGHT  
SOLD OUT  
TO  
HIDE-A-WAY  
LAKE  
7 P.M.**

**NORTH PARK Cinema II**  
N.W.H.W. at NorthPark

Figure 15 - NorthPark Roadshow Ticket Policy

<sup>96</sup> “Downtown-Shopping Center in Tandem: Durwood Twin, 400-Seats and 300-Seats, Will Share Common Concession Stand,” *Variety*, May 29, 1963, 17.

<sup>97</sup> Balio, 111.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> William A. Payne, “Casts and Forecasts: Movie Roadshow Twilight Nears,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 7, 1970, sec. C, p. 6.

In one sense, the roadshow approach is very similar to the clearance system in that a film would debut at a small exclusive group of theaters and then expand as part of a general “wide” release at some later date. The difference between the roadshow and a film being shown as a first-run feature is twofold. First, the definition of “exclusivity” in the typical roadshow release is much narrower than its counterpart under the run-zone-clearance or first-run systems. In a roadshow engagement, only one theater in a region may play a film versus several possible venues in the same town under the clearance system, provided they had enough top-tier locations.<sup>100</sup>

In addition to the exclusivity provided to a film by being shown at only one theater in a particular region, its exclusivity was even further limited at the venue level with theaters only running around ten “performances” per week.<sup>101</sup> This practice was developed so that the roadshow could closely mimic the “event” atmosphere of a live theater venue, which would typically limit their schedules to 8:00 P.M. performances every night with several cheaper matinees offered throughout the week. Roadshow exhibition also appropriated other practices from the legitimate stage by offering patrons reserved, advance ticketing, commemorative programs, overtures, and intermissions.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, these theaters were technologically superior to other cinemas in that they were equipped with 70mm projectors and the ability to play back six-channel magnetic sound. Six-channel sound was not something that was standardized in cinemas until about the mid-nineties. Even the push for “Dolby Stereo” that would become popular in the late ’70s was only four-channel optical sound, which was inferior and had a very low adoption rate.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> William A. Payne, “Metro Roadshows to Cost Millions,” *Dallas Morning News*, March 11, 1967, sec. C, p. 5.

<sup>102</sup> William A. Payne, “Metro All Studios Join Roadshow List,” *Dallas Morning News*, July 16, 1967, sec. D, p.1.

### *The System in Practice*

Like all large companies, General Cinema had a well laid out corporate structure that kept most of the power and decision making in the upper levels of management at the home office in Boston.<sup>103</sup> Film buying (booking) was the one area that had always been left to individual buyers at the local level. General Cinema continued this practice throughout the entire NorthPark period as they felt that only someone living in the region could understand the cultural and socioeconomic specifics of the area and what kinds of films the people living in that area would like. These local film buyers had the independence to anticipate popularity and structure a bid accordingly.<sup>104</sup>

Although Cinema II at NorthPark (the smaller and more intimate of the two auditoriums) was designated as the roadshow house, these types of films were not always available for booking, as they were subject to the distribution plans of the film's distributor. In the interim periods, the cinema would serve as a dual first-run house, showing two exclusive and popular films on a continuous schedule. These films, most of which were rather forgettable or undistinguished films from some of Hollywood's biggest stars and directors, included *Nevada Smith* starring Steve Mc Queen, *Hombre* starring Paul Newman, and *The Night of the Generals* with Peter O'Toole and Omar Sharif. These selections proved to be mostly moderate successes at best and were not usually held over for longer than four weeks.<sup>105</sup> Although these titles are not considered classics today, they were still respected films at the time and the Cinemas at NorthPark never waived from the booking strategy into ethnic, pornographic, or exploitation as many other theaters did.

NorthPark would return to its original, opening day formula whenever possible throughout the late 1960s, which involved pairing a continuous new release with either an old favorite re-release or a new roadshow presentation.

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<sup>103</sup> Pruitt, 119.

<sup>104</sup> Pruitt, 141.

<sup>105</sup> See the end of the chapter for a full list of movies.

While these proved popular, including an eight month re-release run of *Doctor Zhivago* in 1966, the approach reached its zenith at the end of 1967 when Mike Nichols' *The Graduate* was paired with a new 70mm widescreen version of Victor Fleming's 1939 classic *Gone with the Wind*.<sup>106</sup>

It is interesting to note that this pairing was never planned and was actually a gamble on the part of NorthPark's film buyer. The first-run movie that was originally booked instead of *The Graduate* was *The Secret War of Harry Frigg*. The film starred Paul Newman and was supposed to be the big pre-Christmas release for NorthPark in 1967. The movie was not ready in time for release and the theater had to scramble to fill one of the biggest weeks on the calendar. The theater decided to take a risk with *The Graduate* and the film enjoyed a six-month run. *The Secret War of Harry Frigg*, however, was unable to secure another booking for NorthPark.<sup>107</sup>

Although revisiting this strategy for these films resulted in two of the longest and most successful runs at the theater, the social situation in Dallas had already drastically changed from what it had been only three years before, and NorthPark had already made some changes in order to adapt. One example of this can be seen in the way in which the theater presented itself in its advertising. When the Cinemas first opened, as was demonstrated by the advertisement on the second page of this chapter, NorthPark used the classic spelling on the word, "theatre" to portray a level of class while trying to bring people to the new cinema. Furthermore, the main points that they used to sell the theater in that advertisement dealt with certain touches of class as well as patron comfort, relegating the technical advances such as "TRANSISTORIZED STEREOPHONIC SOUND" to the very bottom of the ad.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, December 25, 1967, sec. A, p. 12.

<sup>107</sup> Philip Wuntch, "Wuntch's Classics," *Dallas Morning News*, October 15, 1995, sec. TV Magazine, p. 41.

<sup>108</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, September 22, 1965, sec. A, p. 15.



**Chateau**  
Over 400 Shows  
"THE BALLAD OF JOSIE"  
Doris Day—Peter Graves  
In Color

A REAL ADULT TREAT!  
Not Suitable For Young Persons  
**DEEP INSIDE**  
Plus the TV Hit  
"URSULA"  
EX LUNCH 11 A.M.  
**CORDOT**

WILD 1ST RUN HIT  
SUNDAY  
**Girls CLUB**  
ADULTS  
MULTI  
—PLUS—  
MT  
NO. 2  
"MONDO GIRLS"  
Not Suitable For Young Persons  
**CRESCENT** 11 A.M.  
DISCOUNT PARK NEXT DOOR

LATE SHOW 11:10 CINEMA I  
"THE GRADUATE"  
11:20-11:50 P.M.  
Not Suitable For Young Persons  
"GONE WITH THE WIND"  
12:00-12:30 P.M.  
"HAPPY ACCIDENTS"  
12:30-1:00 P.M.  
"SHADY BOB"  
1:00-1:30 P.M.  
"Ballad of Josie"  
1:30-2:00 P.M.  
"RELUCTANT ASTRO"  
2:00-2:30 P.M.  
**HOT SPARKLER**  
1:30-2:00 P.M.  
11:00 TOWN  
11:00-11:30 P.M.  
**LOOKWOOD**

the eyes (Händel indicates at least a dozen scene changes—the camp of the Israelites, Saul's home, the palace, etc.—all impossible given the performance situation at St. Michael's). The staging was mainly of a blocked, pageant-like nature and the cameras here, Academy Award winner Patricia Neal is wearing a 21-year old hat given to her by Katherine Cornell. This is Miss Neal's first motion picture in three years. The screen adaptation of Frank D.

**GENERAL CINEMA CORPORATION**  
**NORTH PARK**  
Cinema 14 II  
E.M. 9-12 P.M.  
—NOW! 12TH RECORD WEEK—CINEMA I—

**WINNER ACADEMY AWARD NOMINATIONS!**

**THE GRADUATE** —IN—  
COLOR

Not Suitable For Young Persons  
1129-823-829-1129-829-11118

ANNIE BANCROFT...DUSTIN HOFFMAN...KATHARINE ROSS  
CALDER WILLINGHAM...BUCK HENRY PAUL SIMON  
SIMON...GARFUNKEL...LAWRENCE TURMAN  
MIKE NICHOLS TECHNOCOLOR PANAVISION

**LATE SHOW TONIGHT 11:10 P.M.**

CINEMA II

**NOW! 21ST EPIC WEEK**  
In the splendor of 70mm.  
wide screen and full  
stereophonic sound!

**"GONE WITH THE WIND"**

TONIGHT 8 P.M.

Winner of Ten Academy Awards

**CLARK GABLE**  
**VIVIEN LEIGH**  
**LESLIE HOWARD**  
**OLIVIA de HAVILLAND**

YOUTH SHOW SAT.—9:00 A.M. • \$1.00

ADULTS ONLY!  
you will see it all thru The  
Not Suitable For Young Persons  
"MAKE OUT"  
\$1.25 ALWAYS  
1197 Eto  
81 2-661

**KEYHOLE VISTA**  
DOWN CENTER STAGE  
TONIGHT 8:15  
TWIN BILL BY  
**ARTHUR KOPIFF**  
"CHAMBER MUSIC"  
**RAY BRADBURY'S**  
"THE DAY IT RAINED FOREVER"

Not Suitable For Young Persons  
Free Parking — Open 1st A.M.  
\$1.25 High  
Low  
TA LATER  
**LIDO**  
**REX** 822 W. Jefferson  
NEW 11:11 OPEN BOOKS  
Not Suitable For Young Persons  
AN ADULT SOCIETY  
"LOVE CULT"  
PLUS AT LIDO:  
"PLEASUR GIRLS"  
AND NEW LIGHTS  
PLUS AT REE IN COLOR:  
"WEIRD WICKED WORLD"  
And At LIDO: 3 and 10 P.M.  
At REE: 3:30 and 10 P.M.  
ON STAGE IN PERSON!  
NEW GIRLS NEW SHOWS

TONIGHT AT LIDO  
"MIDNIGHT ADULT FUN PARTY"  
Real Stage Shows!

**STUDIO EXPERIMENTAL ADULT THEATRE**  
Not Suitable For Young Persons  
\$1.25 to Meet Great Art  
New Shows and Shows  
Every Week!

**THE SHARPEST SECRET AGENT OF THEM ALL!**

**NOW SHOWING**  
**TERRY MOORE - JAN MURRA**  
LEONARD STONE - JOHN DUNDON - RICHARD WELLS - SAM  
MEM IN MYTCOLOGO  
Jefferson  
Kaufman  
Lone Star

The New Yorker. "Ex-  
cised as an appropriate  
s absolutely gorgeous.  
rd."—New York Times.  
sde."—Newsweek.

Fisher, Best Actress, 1967 Cannes Festival.

**NE ARTS**

1100 MARKET STREET, PHOENIX 1

Figure 16 - Newspaper Advertisement March 15, 1968

The newspaper advertisement from March 15, 1968, is indicative of how the outside cultural influences affected the way in which the Cinemas at NorthPark operated by the late 1960s.<sup>109</sup> As this advertisement demonstrates, General Cinema had already discontinued using the spelling of the word “theatre” (spelled “-re” instead of “-er”), using only the word “cinema” when describing the NorthPark. Furthermore, as the *Gone with the Wind* ad shows, the emphasis was no longer on easy parking and art gallery lounges as was the case in earlier advertisements.<sup>110</sup> By 1968, the focus had shifted to the technological advancements, glorifying the “Splendor of 70mm, widescreen and full stereophonic sound!” presumably in response to shifting consumer tastes.<sup>111</sup> Even the advertisement for *The Graduate* advertised that it is “in color.”

Even more interesting than what this advertisement has to say about the Cinemas at NorthPark, is what surrounds it. In the above newspaper clipping, the NorthPark ad announces showings of two of the most popular and beloved films in motion picture history. This is in contrast to the numerous theaters around town that transitioned into playing “adults-only” fare with titles such as *Deep Inside*, *Mondo Girls*, and even a combination film and stage show called *Midnight Adult Fun Party*.<sup>112</sup> The ads for all of these films (and many others like them) can be seen immediately surrounding the NorthPark advertisement on the previous page.

The fact that these ads were even included indicates an acceptance on the part of Dallasites regarding the advertising of adult product in 1968, a telling commentary about the social mores of the time. When the advertisement announcing the theater originally ran in 1965, only one such ad was present and it was segregated off from the rest of the more general and family friendly fare.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 15, 1968, sec. A, p. 12.

<sup>110</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, September 22, 1965, sec. A, p. 15

<sup>111</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 15, 1968, sec. A, p. 12.

<sup>112</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 15, 1968, sec. A, p. 12

<sup>113</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, September 22, 1965, sec. A, p. 15

Moreover, it speaks to the idea that Gomery and others have regarding the state of the exhibition industry between the years 1965 and 1975. Researchers have often used evidence such as this group of advertisements to argue for the overall decline that occurred in movie theaters during the 1960s and 1970s. These previous authors note that the large number of venues that had converted from first-run to alternative product (including XXX, ethnic, and martial arts films) is an argument in favor of their position.<sup>114</sup> These writers, however, ignore the fact that the largest and most visible of all of these advertisements continues to be for theaters like the Cinemas at NorthPark, which continued to offer audiences both first-run and roadshow films in a safe and technologically superior manner.

#### 1971–1974

By 1971, the roadshow was considered dead, with articles predicting the system's demise beginning to appear as early as the year before.<sup>115</sup> For the Cinemas at NorthPark, however, the roadshow did not cease to be a means of film exhibition until after a successful fifteen-week run of the historical Russian epic *Nicholas and Alexandra* in the summer of 1972, much later than both local and national analysts expected.<sup>116</sup>

The elimination of the roadshow as a viable means of distribution was caused by several shifts in both the production and exhibition tiers of the movie industry. On the production side, the roadshow film, which was usually either an expensive musical or historical epic, was becoming too costly to produce.<sup>117</sup> On the exhibitor side, theaters like NorthPark were experiencing the lowest per-week attendance that the industry had ever seen. To survive, the theaters needed films that could play more than once or twice a day, and the average roadshow ran between three and three and a half hours. No longer able to

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<sup>114</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 103.

<sup>115</sup> William A. Payne, "Movie Roadshow Twilight Nears," *Dallas Morning News*, July 4, 1970, sec. C, p. 6.

<sup>116</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, May 26, 1972, sec. A, p. 22.

<sup>117</sup> Payne, "Movie Roadshow Twilight Nears."

afford the large auditoriums that sat empty for a large part of the week, exhibitors and distributors alike came to see the roadshow as a gimmick and began the process of phasing it out.<sup>118</sup>

Ironically, both sides of the movie industry looked to a NorthPark film, *The Graduate*, as the model of efficiency they wanted to reproduce on a grand scale. In that film, the producers found a small movie that was cheap to produce but would bring in large numbers of people over an extended period of time. The exhibitors liked it for another reason: although the individual tickets were slightly cheaper, they could fit in at least six shows every day because of its sub two-hour running time, maximizing possible profit.<sup>119</sup>

Corporate booking strategies have always had an effect on the culture of the population that they serve, and the economic decision on the part of theaters to shift towards continuous showtimes had significant cultural ramifications as well. When NorthPark offered a roadshow attraction during the late '60s, audiences would reserve their seats weeks in advance and arrive at the theater in more formal attire. The switch to more showtimes and general ticketing changed many aspects of how, when, and where the people of Dallas watched their movies. As such, it made the films more accessible to the general public and as a subsequent result, going to the movies became less of an event. In fact, these continuous showtimes were so convenient people could just walk over from NorthPark Center and use a film as a shopping break. But even more important than the effect that NorthPark's bookings had on how, when, and where the people of Dallas watched their movies was the effect that Dallas' first twin cinemas had on *which* movies the rest of the world saw.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 1, 1968, sec. A, p. 14.

### *1974: A Case Study*

Occurring just prior to the cinema's ten-year anniversary, 1974 was a remarkable year for the theater in both ticket sales as well as in terms of its cultural impact. Veering away from the "safer" adult comedies and dramas that had been popular, the bookers brought in "edgier" movies, such as Sidney Lumet's *Serpico*, Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather: Part II*, Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles*, and the Charles Bronson cult classic, *Death Wish*, over the course of the year. The result was a much more diverse lineup than had been present over the preceding decade.

The engagements of these movies that would become beloved classics at NorthPark worked to bond the people of Dallas to this location in a way that the modern system of films and cinemas has not seemed to appropriate. The primary reason for this could be attributed to the booking structure discussed earlier in this chapter. The exclusivity inherent under such a system meant that a visit to this theater would be the first chance the people had to see these films and as such, NorthPark provided a unique, event-type atmosphere. In contrast, today's system of saturation booking means that a popular film like *Avatar* plays at every theater that will take it, and it does not create the bond between product and venue that the Cinemas at NorthPark enjoyed.

Although the concept of exclusivity works to explain why people originally came to the theater, it does not address how a personal and cultural bond was created between the people of Dallas and the theater. The reasons for this are as difficult to ascertain as they are as numerous as the number of tickets sold throughout the years. Each screening created unique memories for those present regardless of whether they were there to work or to be entertained. And while some might not have lasted beyond the car ride home, others have changed lives forever.

For example, there is the story of Robin Lang, who got her first job at the General Cinema NorthPark in the spring 1974. At the time, she was paid a paltry \$1 per hour to serve

popcorn, but she has always looked back on the time fondly. When asked about her favorite experience at the theater she thought back to when the theater had the comedy classic *Blazing Saddles*. Of that experience she said, "I remember every night you'd open the doors, and the crowd would come in and start mooing, it was always fun."<sup>120</sup> It is interesting to note that Ms. Lang chose a film from this era as the one that inspired her nostalgia since she not only stayed at the theater for many years after, but she also got promoted into management. She would later become the last manager the theater ever had.<sup>121</sup>

Of course employees were not the only people to make a personal connection with NorthPark during this period. On May 24, 1974, a long journey ended and an even longer one began when Joe Camp's *Benji* opened in NorthPark's giant Cinema I auditorium.<sup>122</sup> Today, *Benji* is associated with a dynastic legacy that has at least eight spin-off films, several television specials, books, a toy line, and even an Oscar nomination to its credit. But in 1974, prior to its run at NorthPark, it was no more than a "dog movie" at a time when "dog movies" didn't do well.<sup>123</sup>

In his 1993 autobiography, *Underdog: How One Man Turned Hollywood Rejection Into the Worldwide Phenomenon of Benji*, director Joe Camp dedicates almost an entire chapter to the role that Dallas' first twin played in turning *Benji* into a household name. As his book title suggests, Camp was turned away from almost every distributor and theater in the country going into the summer of 1974.<sup>124</sup> The only thing keeping *Benji* from universal rejection had come from Dallas' Village Theater, a struggling cinema about five miles southwest of NorthPark. This theater, which was owned by General Cinema's competitor,

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<sup>120</sup> Philip Wuntch, "That's a Wrap: NorthPark Cinemas' last day stirs nostalgia," *Dallas Morning News*, October 23, 1998, Section News, p.37A.

<sup>121</sup> Ron Beardmore, interview by author, Dallas, Texas, October 20, 2004.

<sup>122</sup> Joe Camp, *Underdog: How One Man Turned Hollywood Rejection Into the Worldwide Phenomenon of BENJI*, (Marietta, Georgia: Longstreet Press, Inc., 1993), 229.

<sup>123</sup> Camp, 205.

<sup>124</sup> Camp, 203.

Interstate, had offered the producers an eight week run at their theater with a guarantee of \$40,000 to bring the family film to the Village.<sup>125</sup>

Figure 17 - 1974 Advertisement for *Benji*

Although the amount offered by Interstate would have paid for about one-sixth of the film's original budget, Camp understood an important psychological component of the movie exhibition industry and how it manifested itself in the Dallas market. He recognized that "the public knew where the good pictures played, and the rotten pictures played. Put a terrific

<sup>125</sup> Camp, 213.

picture into a lousy theater that usually plays lousy pictures, and no one's going to go . . . on the other hand, put the worst picture in the world in a theater like NorthPark and it will do at least *some* business because people assume that it must be good or it wouldn't be playing there."<sup>126</sup>

Following this line of reasoning, Camp rejected Interstate's offer and held out for a booking at NorthPark, which finally came on the last week of May. Although Camp got the booking that he wanted, the terms offered by General Cinema were far less favorable than those previously offered by rival Interstate. First, they were only given a three week run—far too short of a time for a film like this to really prove that it had “legs.” Second, they were not given a guarantee from the theater. If the film were to fail, they would lose the added financial security offered by the Village. And third, the opening week of the run was going to happen while school was still in session, isolating the movie from its target audience. It was a risky gamble, but Camp decided to take it and have the world premiere at NorthPark.<sup>127</sup>

Needless to say, *Benji* was a great success. Despite their previous reservations about the film, General Cinema extended the run at NorthPark for another week, bringing the grand total to four. After that, director Joe Camp was off to other markets around the country attempting to duplicate his success in Dallas. Armed with financial records from one of the most successful and well respected theaters in the country, he sought out what he termed “NorthPark quality” theaters (a direct quote) in each city to play his film.<sup>128</sup>

Camp regards the decision to open the film at NorthPark as “probably the most important decision we made throughout the entire process.”<sup>129</sup> This lent credibility to the film and was ultimately responsible for its success, as Mr. Camp freely admits. As a tradition, Mr. Camp premiered all of his subsequent films at the Cinemas at NorthPark.

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<sup>126</sup> Camp, 212.

<sup>127</sup> Camp, 213.

<sup>128</sup> Camp, 216.

<sup>129</sup> Camp, 214.



### *The End of NorthPark's First Decade*

By mid-decade, the industry as a whole had become depressingly stagnant. 1971 was the worst year in history for movie attendance and there had only been a moderate bounce back by 1975.<sup>130</sup> In the same way that the multiscreened theaters of the 1960s were built as a way to save the film industry from the economic effects of the Paramount Decrees, both tiers (distribution and exhibition) were now in search of a new system to save them after the collapse of the roadshow. The solution for both parties would soon come, not from a dog named Benji, but from a shark named Bruce.

### *Movies Exhibited at NorthPark 1965–1974*

#### 1965

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. The Sandpiper                           | 6. The King And I                                  |
| 2. The Greatest Story Ever Told (Roadshow) | 7. Cat Ballou and Dr. Strangelove (Double Feature) |
| 3. The Yellow Rolls-Royce                  | 8. Peyton Place and Return to Peyton Place         |
| 4. What's New Pussycat                     | 9. Do Not Disturb                                  |
| 5. The Cincinnati Kid                      | 10. My Fair Lady                                   |

#### 1966

- |                              |                                    |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Where the Spies Are       | 11. Nevada Smith                   |
| 2. The Rare Breed            | 12. Glass Bottom Boat              |
| 3. The Loved One             | 13. Beau Geste                     |
| 4. Seven Women               | 14. One Spy Too Many               |
| 5. Madame X                  | 15. The Idol                       |
| 6. Doctor Zhivago (Roadshow) | 16. The Fighting Prince of Donegal |
| 7. Harper                    | 17. La Dolce Vita                  |
| 8. Money Trap                | 18. Gambit                         |
| 9. Alphabet Murders          | 19. Alfie                          |
| 10. Big Hand                 |                                    |

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<sup>130</sup> David A. Cook, "Formative Industry Trends, 1970-1979," In *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (New York: C. Scribner, 2000), 22.

1967

1. Penelope
2. The Venetian Affair
3. The Night of the Generals
4. 25th Hour
5. Hotel
6. Taming of the Shrew (Roadshow)
7. Hombre
8. Caprice
9. Two for the Road
10. Divorce American Style
11. A Guide for Married Men
12. El Dorado
13. Luv
14. The Flim-Flam Man
15. The Tiger and the Pussycat
16. The Long Duel
17. Becket
18. Games
19. Gone with the Wind (Roadshow)
20. Jack of Diamonds
21. Rosie
22. Robbery
23. The Graduate

1968

1. Boom!
2. Where Were You When the Lights Went Out?
3. Prudence and the Pill
4. The Hell with Heroes
5. Duffy
6. The Boston Strangler
7. Finian's Rainbow (Roadshow)
8. Candy
9. The Lady in Cement

1969

1. Oliver (Roadshow)
2. Three in the Attic
3. Hell in the Pacific
4. Midas Run
5. Goodbye, Columbia
6. April Fools
7. That Cold Day in the Park
8. Me, Natalie
9. Thank You All Very Much
10. Hail, Hero
11. Take the Money and Run
12. The Comic
13. The Royal Hunt of the Sun
14. Alfred the Great
15. Marooned (Roadshow)
16. Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice

1970

1. Z
2. Airport
3. A Walk in the Spring Rain
4. The Boys in the Band
5. The Out of Towners
6. On a Clear Day You Can See Forever
7. Lovers and Other Strangers
8. Baby Maker
9. The Twelve Chairs
10. Owl and the Pussycat
11. The Great White Hope

1971

1. Wuthering Heights
2. Promise at Dawn
3. The Andromeda Strain
4. Doctors' Wives
5. They Might Be Giants
6. When Eight Bells Toll
7. Plaza Suite
8. Carnal Knowledge
9. Blue Water, White Death
10. The Summertime
11. Oliver (RR)
12. See No Evil
13. Dr. Zhivago (RR)
14. Kotch
15. Gone with the Wind (RR)
16. Bedknobs and Broomsticks
17. Star Spangled Girl

1972

1. Made for Each Other
2. Nicholas and Alexandra (Roadshow)
3. Pocket Money
4. What's Up Doc?
5. Stand Up and Be Counted
6. Play It Again, Sam
7. Butterflies Are Free
8. The Man
9. Slaughterhouse Five
10. Where Does It Hurt
11. Funny Girl (RR)
12. Lady Sings the Blues
13. The Valachi Papers
14. Young Winston
15. Up the Sandbox

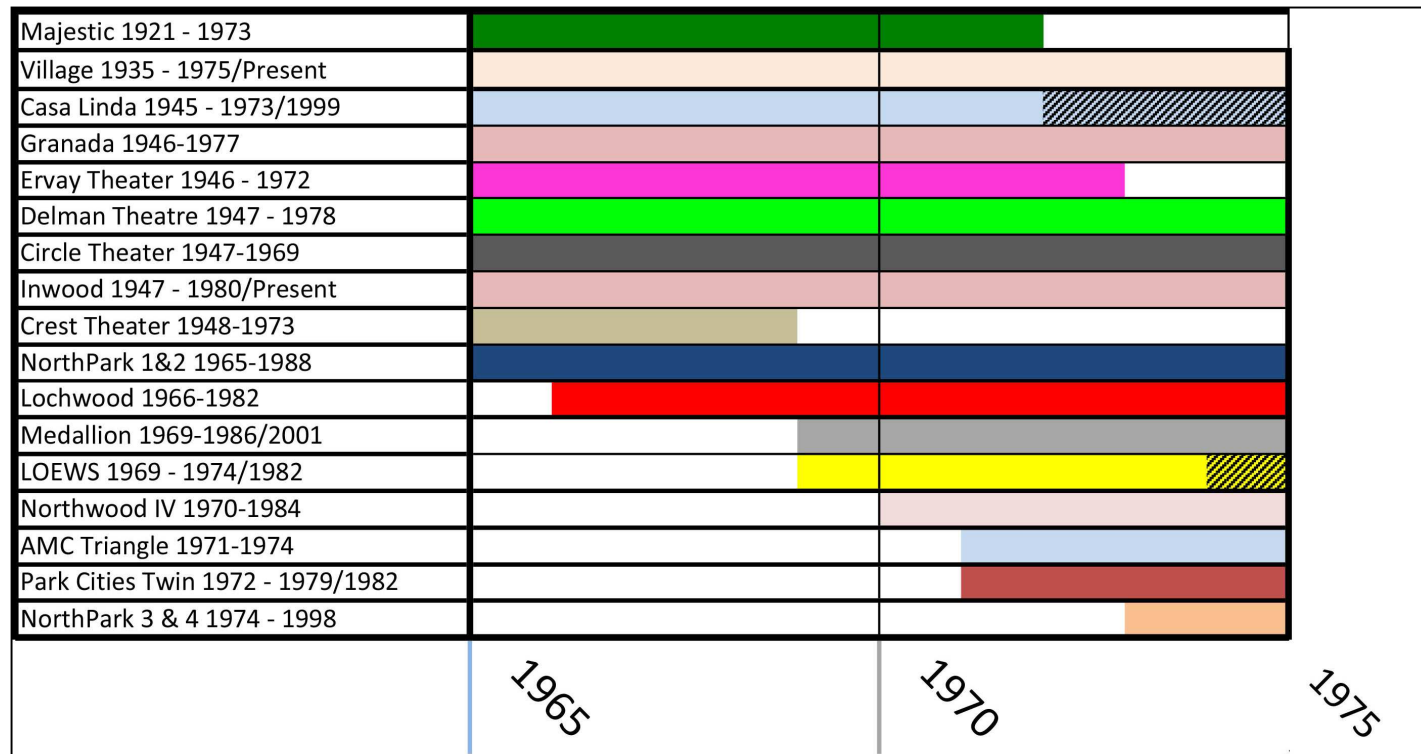
1973

1. Man in the Moon
2. Save the Tiger
3. Sleuth
4. Lost Horizon
5. Hitler: The Last Ten Days
6. The Paper Moon
7. Cries and Whispers
8. Blume in Love
9. Lucky Man
10. Touch of Class
11. The Way We Were
12. The Seagull
13. The Day of the Dolphin
14. Don't Look Now

1974

1. Cinderella Liberty
2. Serpico
3. Blazing Saddles
4. The Great Gatsby
5. Benji
6. Daisy Miller
7. Our Time
8. My Name Is Nobody
9. Death Wish
10. The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz
11. Harry and Tonto
12. The Gambler
13. 11 Harrow House
14. Earthquake
15. The Dove
16. The Godfather: Part II

Table 3 - Movie Theaters in Operation 1965–1974



## Chapter 4

### Competition and Saturation Bookings, 1975–1984

If any single film marked the arrival of the New Hollywood, it was *Jaws*, the Spielberg-directed thriller that recalibrated the profit potential of the Hollywood hit, and redefined its status as a marketable commodity and cultural phenomenon as well. The film brought an emphatic end to Hollywood's five-year recession, while ushering in an era of high-cost, high-tech, high-speed thrillers.

—Thomas Schatz<sup>131</sup>

On June 20, 1975, Universal Pictures forever changed the movie exhibition industry when the company released Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* to theaters.<sup>132</sup> Although the classic film about a killer shark was never actually exhibited at the Cinemas at NorthPark, the introduction of "saturation booking" that accompanied this release shifted the way in which Dallas' first twin would operate through to its closing over twenty years later. This shift in booking practices, along with the further effects of northern migration of people into Dallas' suburbs as they pertain to the Cinemas at NorthPark and the surrounding theaters, will be the focus of this chapter.

#### *Northern Expansion*

In the years preceding the release of *Jaws* in 1975, Dallas had experienced a boom in small, multiscreen cinema building. Only ten years before, NorthPark had been the singular multiscreened venue in town, but by the mid-1970s, theaters with more than one auditorium had already become the norm. Advertisements from that era show that in 1975 there were a total of ten twins (including the NorthPark I & II), one triplex, four quads, as well as two locations with six screens within the city of Dallas and the immediately surrounding suburbs.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in *Film Theory Goes To The Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (New York, New York: Routledge, 1993), 17.

<sup>132</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, June 20, 1975, sec. A, p. 17.

<sup>133</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, June 20, 1975, sec. A, p. 14-18. Statistics refer to indoor theaters showing non-XXX features.

Of course, these multiplexes were not the only places to watch movies during this period. In addition to the previously mentioned locations (which accounted for fifty-one individual auditoriums), there were numerous drive-ins as well as a handful of single screens sprinkled throughout the area. Most of these single auditorium venues were of the type that Gomery describes as indicative of movie theaters in the 1970s in *Shared Pleasures*, exhibiting alternative and “B” movie product to a house full of mostly empty seats. There were, however, two single screen theaters that existed at this time which deserve special analysis at this point as they represent the exception to Gomery’s position: the Inwood and the Medallion. Both of these cinemas were similar to the Cinemas at NorthPark in their location (serving the North Dallas area) and approach to the business, and through comparison and contrast offer a unique insight into the structure of exhibition during this time period.

First, the Inwood Theatre, opened in 1947 by the ABC Interstate theater chain, was a neighborhood theater built to service the Highland Park suburb of North Dallas.<sup>134</sup> Located about three miles west of the intersection of Central Expressway and Northwest Highway, the Inwood continued to offer stiff competition to the General Cinema twin throughout the 1970s even as it approached its third decade of operation. Once a master of roadshow bookings (including a record-holding ninety-two week run of *The Sound of Music* throughout most of 1965 and 1966), the Inwood had transitioned into a popular first-run house by this time: offering premiere features in its large, 1,100 seat, traditional auditorium with balcony.<sup>135</sup> By 1980, the Inwood could no longer support the single screen model, and by 1983, it had converted to a three-screen location.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> “Inwood Theatre Newest Suburban to Open Friday,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 10, 1947, sec. I, p. 10.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Cinematreasures.org, “Inwood Theatre in Dallas, TX – Cinema Treasures,” accessed February 19, 2015, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/919>.



Figure 18 - Inwood Theatre

The second theater of note, the Medallion, was also owned by ABC Interstate Theatres and was located only one mile east of NorthPark.<sup>137</sup> When it opened in 1969, many considered it to be the primary competitor to the Cinemas at NorthPark. In addition to the types of films that the Medallion played, it shared General Cinema's adherence to the minimalist vision of theater design. It was a simple, aesthetically scaled-down, "box style" theater so that the film on screen remained as the primary attraction to patrons.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> William A. Payne, "Interstate Loop to Open Medallion Thursday," *Dallas Morning News*, October 26, 1969, sec. C, p.1.

<sup>138</sup> Cinematreasures.org, "Medallion 5 Theatre in Dallas, TX – Cinema Treasures," accessed February 19, 2015, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/23608/photos/21183>.



Figure 19 - Opening Day Advertisement for Medallion Theatre

In their attempts to compete with the NorthPark I & II, each theater had their own advantages. The Inwood was classic and comfortable to those in the immediate surrounding neighborhoods. It offered the nostalgia of a downtown theater in a more intimate and geographically desirable location. The Medallion, however, was more of a “destination” theater like the NorthPark Cinemas, bringing in people from all over the country after gaining a reputation for a superior projection and sound experience. It was for this reason that it attracted the attention of Steven Spielberg who chose to preview the aforementioned *Jaws* at the single screen prior to its opening in Dallas.<sup>139</sup> The screening went so well that he

<sup>139</sup> John Anders, “Sneaky Sneak,” *Dallas Morning News*, October 22, 1977, sec. F, p. 1.



deemed the theater a “good luck charm” and continued to preview subsequent films at the location until its conversion to a discount cinema in the 1980s.<sup>140</sup>

Together, these three theaters were the foundation for a new type of “theater row” that was beginning to be developed around the corner of Northwest Highway and I-75. This northward migration of theater concentrations (Dallas’ original theater row was located about seven miles south in the downtown area) mimicked the movement of people as they began to occupy the northern areas of Dallas in greater numbers.

Much of this theater and population migration to the area can be attributed to the housing construction in the immediate vicinity surrounding NorthPark Center. Most influential towards this end was The Village Community, which opened its initial phase in 1971.<sup>141</sup> This “Community” was a constellation of apartment complexes positioned directly between the Cinemas at NorthPark and the Medallion Theatre. This one community alone would eventually be responsible for bringing 10,000 young, middle-class residents (prime moviegoers) to a 337 acre area which directly fed the customer base of these two theaters.<sup>142</sup>

### *Saturation Booking*

Without the financial support from the stronger distribution and production companies, theaters were now forced to rely solely on profits derived from concessions and a small percentage from the box office while absorbing 100% of the overhead. Furthermore, this system put the theaters in an adversarial position against the film distributors, who were their sole product suppliers. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, while the exhibitors were doing everything they could to lower their overhead by way of building design and reducing

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<sup>140</sup> Philip Wuntch, “Wuntch’s Classics,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 9, 1995, TV Magazine, p. 42.

<sup>141</sup> Thevillageapts.com, “The Village Apartments,” accessed October 20, 2014, <http://www.thevillageapts.com/history/index.shtml>.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

staff, the distributors were pitting the theater chains against each other by forcing them to compete for the on-screen product.<sup>143</sup>

Ostensibly outlawed by a provision in the 1948 Paramount Decrees, this new form of blind booking that was introduced in the early 1970s was presented to theaters as the only way to get bigger budget epics to movie screens. Under this system, the distributors would require a deposit from the theaters on a particular film in order to cover the rising costs of the production. This deposit would then be recouped from the opening grosses of the film when it finally came out. Obviously, this was done without the exhibitor ever seeing the movie as the deposit was typically required prior to the commencement of filming.

The theaters knew that they would need a steady stream of product in order to survive and went along with blind booking while attempting to fight it in the courts and by trying to pass legislation that made the system illegal.<sup>144</sup> In practice, exhibitors were now not only responsible for assuming all of the risk and overhead at the local level, but they were also financing the movies for the production/distribution side of the industry. Along with taking on the financial risk of movie making, it also meant that the exhibitor's money was tied up, limiting their ability to make capital improvements to existing theaters and preventing them from being able to build new ones. The result of this was the austere multiplex of the '60s and '70s.

The idea of saturation booking (showing the same film at multiple venues in each town) was nothing new when Universal released *Jaws* in the summer of 1975. Alternative content and drive-in films almost always had their releases on as many screens as possible when they opened in Dallas in order to maximize profits off of a single run. The ad from 1971 for the film *Swamp Girl* demonstrates how the distributor would skip the typical first-run theaters and immediately begin with the lower quality and less exclusive locations. The

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<sup>143</sup> Pruitt, 136.

<sup>144</sup> Cook, 17-18.

reason for this approach was that since these movies were of a lesser quality, they would be able to beat bad reviews and poor word of mouth by getting as many tickets sold as quickly as possible.



Figure 20 - Newspaper Advertisement for *Swamp Girl*

With the release of *Jaws*, Universal Pictures opted to apply this model on a national scale to a popular film, and in doing so, forever changed how people in this country watched their films by providing audiences with greater accessibility to them. This would be the first time that the top-tier, first-run theaters would be incorporated into this practice of “saturation booking.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, prior to the release of *Jaws* in 1975, most big studio films would open at just one location in each major city during their first-run release. Depending on how wide the distributor wanted to define the term, “major city” would determine how many locations in the country played the film. During the roadshow days, this could be as few as five theaters spread throughout the country, but at the height of multiple runs in the early 1970s, this number went as high as fifty. In contrast, *Jaws* opened concurrently on about 467 screens nationwide.<sup>145</sup>

This was not an incremental change, it was a dramatic jump that had a profound effect on the industry as a whole, creating a never before seen phenomenon—the “blockbuster.” The movie-going public had never experienced anything like this. Up to this point, distributors had spent the last forty years creating a paradigm where excitement for the better films would be built through exclusivity. For the public, this meant further drives, longer lines, and a higher admission price for those who chose to attend them during their earlier stages of a release. The industry had taught the consumer that if the film was good, access to it would be limited. The new model flipped this to a point where distributors would go as far as to publish screen counts as a way to demonstrate and exaggerate expected demand.

Although directors like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas have been credited as the “creators” of the blockbuster because of films in this time period like *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, and the *Indiana Jones* series, it should be noted that this is more of a marketing term than a precise, quantitative definition for a specific type of movie.<sup>146</sup> The term was coined as a way to categorize certain “supergrossers” that had attained a certain level of status in American culture as well as their ability to garner ancillary, non-theatrical profits from sources like toy,

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<sup>145</sup>Charles R. Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies Multiplexes and Global Culture* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), 160.

<sup>146</sup>Jess Cagle, “Spielberg’s List: What a Director Who Has It All Wants to Do Next,” *Time Magazine*, June 24, 2002.

game, and soundtrack sales.<sup>147</sup> The practice of saturation booking is just one aspect of this greater definition.

*The Movies: From Star Wars to Return of the Jedi*

The release of *Star Wars* in 1977 marked the high point for the Cinemas at NorthPark, both in business terms and in how it helped cement this particular theater in the hearts of Dallas residents. As is the case with most things having to do with the hugely popular space adventure, there are many points of contention regarding *Star Wars*' original release in Dallas. Popular memory has become clouded over as to what sound and picture format debuted at NorthPark (Mono vs. Dolby Stereo, 35mm vs. 70mm) with many people claiming they watched it in 70mm Dolby Stereo and that the Cinemas at NorthPark was one of the sites to open the film on May 25, 1977 (a Wednesday). This was not the case. The daily box office figures from that time show that the movie opened in Cinema II on Friday, May 27 in 35mm mono.<sup>148</sup>

DAY (✓)	DATE	ATTRACTION (CINEMA I)	NET RECEIPTS	DAY (✓)	DATE	ATTRACTION (CINEMA I)	NET RECEIPTS
W F	5/20	AIRPORT 77	1295.25	W F	5/27	CROSS OF IRON	787.50
T S	21	9TH WK.	1649.25	T S	28	3RD WK.	1200.50
S	22		939.50	S	29		1698.00
S M	23		329.25	S M	30		1511.50
S T	24		318.75	S T	31		534.75
M W	25		313.75	M W	6/1		593.75
T T	26		269.00	T T	2		105.00
TOTAL \$ 5114.75				TOTAL \$ 6431.00			
DAY (✓)	DATE	ATTRACTION (CINEMA II)	NET RECEIPTS	DAY (✓)	DATE	ATTRACTION (CINEMA II)	NET RECEIPTS
W F	5/20	CROSS OF IRON	1922.00	W F	5/27	STAR WARS	14050.50
T S	21	2ND WK.	2380.50	T S	28		17125.00
F S	22		1666.50	F S	29		19954.50
S M	23		875.00	S M	30		18409.50
S T	24		827.50	S T	31		10696.25
M W	25		827.50	M W	6/1		10345.00
T T	26		772.00	T T	2		9478.25
TOTAL \$ 9271.00				TOTAL \$ 100058.75			

Figure 21 - NorthPark Box Office Report: Weeks Ending May 26 and June 2, 1977

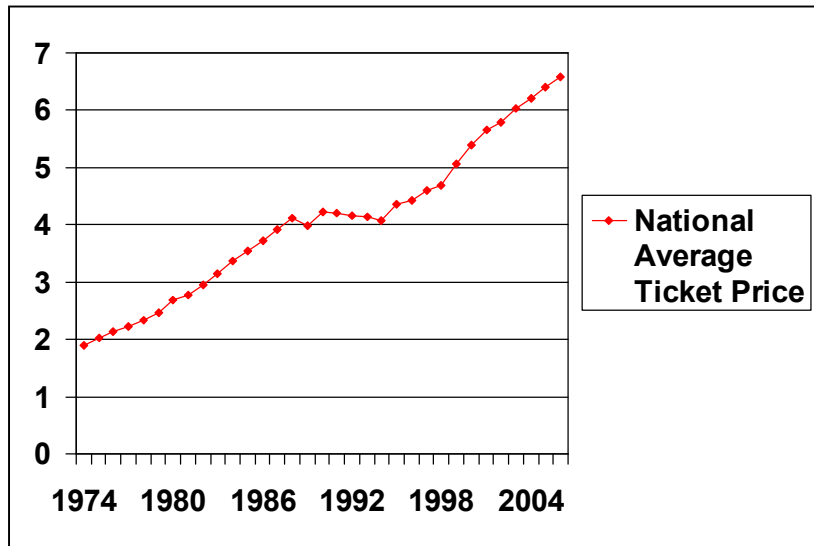
<sup>147</sup> Balio, 442.

<sup>148</sup> "General Cinema Theaters Weekly Summary 11/76 to 11/82," spreadsheet, n.d., in author's possession.

These numbers not only provide proof that there were no shows of *Star Wars* until May 27, but it demonstrates the popularity of the film from its first day of release. On its opening day, the one auditorium showing *Star Wars* grossed almost the same amount as both auditoriums combined for the entire previous week (dispelling the common misconception that the film took time to build its audience).

Regardless of whether it was for reasons of exclusivity or because they thought that they had a “dud” on their hands (another point in contention), Twentieth Century Fox decided to scale back from what had become a standard, six hundred screen release after the start of saturation booking in 1975, and elected instead for a limited run of forty-three locations across the country, with only two of these being in the state of Texas.<sup>149</sup> This release strategy granted NorthPark an exclusivity on the film that harkened back to the days of the old roadshow system.

Table 4 - National Average Ticket Price 1974–2004



<sup>149</sup> Michael Coate, "Notes," *Star Wars a Day Long Remembered for Thrills More than Lucas' Personal Budget*, accessed February 19, 2015, [http://www.fromscripttodvd.com/star\\_wars\\_a\\_day\\_long\\_remembered.htm](http://www.fromscripttodvd.com/star_wars_a_day_long_remembered.htm).

Ultimately, the original engagement of *Star Wars* extended to 54 weeks, taking in an estimated \$1.5 million in that time.<sup>150</sup> In order to understand the enormity of that figure, the average ticket price at the time was \$2.23,<sup>151</sup> versus today's price of \$8.13.<sup>152</sup> This would have amounted to a \$4.42 million take at a single box office window by today's standards. Furthermore, the studio's figures for the initial, national release of the film put their total at \$215 million. When broken down mathematically, that means that one out of every two hundred people in the country that saw the film in its original release saw it at NorthPark.

Due to the unusually long engagement of *Star Wars* throughout 1977 and much of 1978, combined with extended runs of films like *Superman*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *The Deer Hunter* around the turn of the decade, NorthPark hit their lowest mark in number of films played per year, not breaking thirteen releases again until 1981. This should not be viewed as a negative situation, but one that demonstrates how important the movie product itself was at this time. In the age of the palace theaters, a theater could go through several movies in one week.<sup>153</sup> The modern first-run cinemas will typically cycle through three to four new releases per week, or almost two hundred movies per year, with most films only running two to three weeks on average. The fact that a major cinema was only changing out movies once a month (with one in and one out), meant that the films were held for eight weeks on average, which had not been seen before or since. Even long roadshow runs in the 1960s were rare, and the other run-zone-clearance films of the early 1970s were being held for closer to three to four weeks.

The year 1982 was another slow year in terms of product changeover, but extremely important in terms of cementing NorthPark's historic significance. In that year, the twin

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<sup>150</sup> "General Cinema Theaters Weekly Summary 11/76 to 11/82," spreadsheet, n.d., in author's possession.

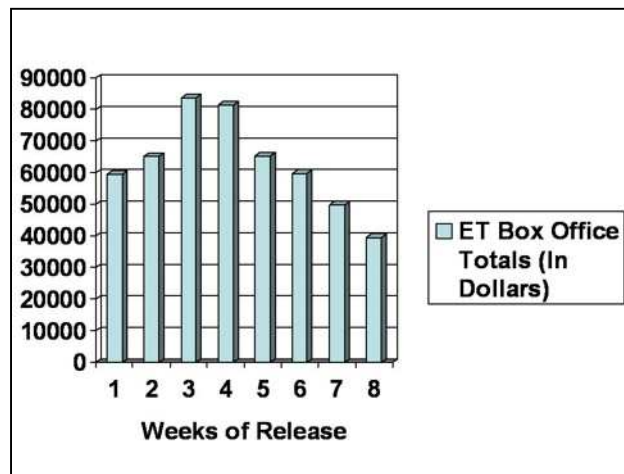
<sup>151</sup> Patrick Corcoran, "Annual Average U.S. Ticket Price," *Natoonline.org*, last modified 2013, accessed January 14, 2015, <http://natoonline.org/data/ticket-price/>.

<sup>152</sup> Boxofficemojo.com, "All Time Box Office Adjusted for Ticket Price Inflation," last modified 2015, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/adjusted.htm>.

<sup>153</sup> Gregory Waller, "At the Picture Show," in *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, ed. Ina Rae Hark (New York, New York: Routledge, 2002), 36.

cinemas went against their well-established formula of playing popular, adult-themed films in order to play what was considered to be a children’s movie. This strategy had been attempted with little success in the early days of the theater with a string of unremarkable Disney films during the late 1960s. This time, however, the film would be one of the Steven Spielberg blockbusters—*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*—and it became one of top ten grossing films of all time.<sup>154</sup>

Table 5 - E.T. Box Office Totals



Of course the run of *E.T.* at NorthPark was wildly successful. In fact, its popularity grew over its first couple weeks of release with weeks three and four being the highest grossing periods. This is something that is almost completely unheard of in a wide-release situation with attendance being so heavily front-loaded. But to those that frequented the Cinemas, the movie about the loveable alien conjures a story about an equally loveable Broadway star that had nothing to do with the film at all. This is because when she was in town for a touring theater performance, Carol Channing stopped in to catch an afternoon screening of the film and distributed tissues to crying patrons at emotional points in the

<sup>154</sup> Boxofficemojo.com, “All Time Domestic Box Office Results,” last modified 2015, accessed January 8, 2015, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/domestic.htm>.



film.<sup>155</sup> Celebrities stopping in to see a movie was nothing new to the Cinemas at NorthPark. In fact, there was a private balcony that could only be accessed from the projection booth that many directors and actors had used over the years in order to judge audience reactions or simply enjoy a film in private without anyone knowing that they were there.<sup>156</sup>

Another favorite story that consistently resurfaced at the time of NorthPark's closing also came from 1982. On March 6 of that year, the theater held a special advance screening



Figure 22 - Newspaper Advertisement for Advance Screening of *Blade Runner*

of the new futuristic adventure film, *Blade Runner*.<sup>157</sup> This was one of only two advance screenings that the film ever had and the only one with actor Harrison Ford, director Ridley Scott, and producer Alan Ladd Jr. in attendance.<sup>158</sup> The screening was not met with universal acclaim. One member of the press described the atmosphere: “Almost dead

<sup>155</sup> Philip Wuntch, “RETURN OF E.T. – After 3 years, a boy and his alien still work magic,” *Dallas Morning News*, July 19, 1985, sec. Arts and Entertainment, p. 1C.

<sup>156</sup> Ron Beardmore, interview by author, Dallas, Texas, October 20, 2004.

<sup>157</sup> Blade-runner.it, “Blade Runner – The Replicant Site – Approved by San Jose Attorneys,” last modified 2015, accessed November 17, 2007, <http://www.blade-runner.it/versioni-e.html>.

<sup>158</sup> Philip Wuntch, “He’s Just a Regular Indiana Jones: ‘Normal’ Actor Harrison Ford Isn’t Impressed with Film Stardom,” *Dallas Morning News*, February 3, 1985, sec. Arts and Entertainment, p. 1C.

silence greeted the end of the film. As the lights came up, the audience filed out as quietly as if they were leaving a funeral service. Many were confused and depressed by the film's atmosphere and ambiguous climax."<sup>159</sup>

In addition to negative patron reactions at the end of the film, there were also a large number of walkouts. The film's distributor, Warner Brothers, decided they could not release the movie as it was presented that night and the film underwent extensive editing, a changed ending, and the addition of a Harrison Ford voiceover.<sup>160</sup>

The patron reaction to this screening of *Blade Runner* changed the way that people saw that particular movie when it was released to theaters. But the following year, NorthPark would go beyond content changes in individual films and become influential in the way that movies would be viewed and heard for the next twenty years. That was the year they installed their much celebrated THX system in Cinema I.<sup>161</sup>

The THX system installed at NorthPark was only the third one to ever be completed in the country and because of that, it helped to define standards for the future of the system. The idea for THX, which stands for the Tomlinson Holman eXperiment, began over a decade prior to the 1983 release of George Lucas' *Return of the Jedi* when the sci-fi director released *THX-1138* to theaters. At the time, Lucas was concerned about the varying picture and sound qualities that he experienced when visiting theaters around the country that were showing his film due to the lack of standardized practices. He went to then corporate technical director of Lucasfilm, Thomas Holliman, for a solution to the problem.<sup>162</sup>

THX is usually misunderstood to be a sound system or sound format. Instead, it is a collection of standards on theater construction and equipment installation that include the physical structure of the auditorium, the projection system, the seating arrangement, and the

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<sup>159</sup> Paul Sammon, *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner* (New York: HarperPrism, 1996), 287.

<sup>160</sup> Sammon, 291.

<sup>161</sup> "Inside the Arts: The Sound of Ewoks," *Dallas Morning News*, May 22, 1983, sec. C, p.1.

<sup>162</sup> Jeff Tyson, "Short History – How THX Works," *Howstuffworks.com*, last modified 2015, accessed November 16, 2007, <http://www.howstuffworks.com/thx1.htm>.

sound system.<sup>163</sup> When Holman personally arrived at NorthPark to design their new THX system, he found a theater that already exceeded many of the standards of his ideal new theater. In fact, according to head projectionist Ron Beardmore, Holman was so impressed with what he found at NorthPark that many of NorthPark's design elements became required in future THX installations around the world.<sup>164</sup> It is important to note that at this point the theater was almost twenty years old and had not undergone any major renovations to the auditoriums. Even so, it was still considered to be of such high quality that THX tried to duplicate it around the world. The engagement of *Return of the Jedi* was only one of six for the Dallas area and was so popular that lines wrapped around the building with customers eager to "see it at NorthPark."<sup>165</sup>



Figure 23 - Line Around Building for *Return of the Jedi*

#### *The Effects of Saturation Booking on North Dallas Theaters*

After the release of the original *Star Wars* in 1977, the runs for the big films became less exclusive as multiscreened theater expansion exploded again and distributors embraced the blockbuster/saturation model as the status quo. This shift would have some

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ron Beardmore, interview by author, Dallas, Texas, October 20, 2004.

<sup>165</sup> Brad Bailey, "Box Office Strikes Back: Eager Force Fans Vie for View of *Jedi*," *Dallas Morning News*, May, 26, 1983, p. 25A.

effect on NorthPark as the middle of the 1980s approached, resulting in somewhat smaller audiences, shorter runs, and less exclusivity on the films they booked. In reality, these changes were small and NorthPark was able to remain relatively unaffected by these throughout the decade by maintaining a slate of high-caliber bookings and by not making any reactionary changes in their practices or the facility.

NorthPark's competitors, however, did not handle the changes in the industry so well. Both the venerable Inwood and Medallion theaters spent large amounts of money on construction projects in order to remain economically viable after being unable to keep up with the new multiple run, blockbuster booking system which required multiple auditoriums in order to keep up with the amount of available product.

After a mysterious fire damaged the interior of the building in 1980, the Inwood was forced to close its balcony and eventually convert it into two small cinema screens, each capable of holding less than one hundred people.<sup>166</sup> Its downstairs auditorium remained mostly intact throughout this process; the original screen was kept by moving the projection booth down to the seating level.

The changes at the once mighty and acclaimed Medallion Theatre were even more drastic than those that occurred at the Inwood; the main auditorium was converted into three smaller screens, with two others eventually added to the periphery of the building. The first phase of this new construction came as a result of the sale of the theater to the United Artists theater chain.<sup>167</sup>

Once again, this demonstrates the way in which the Cinemas at NorthPark were able to remain on top, while the others around them failed, despite drastic shifts in the way the industry operated. It is important to note that General Cinema did build another location

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<sup>166</sup> Philip Wuntch, "Renovated Inwood Theatre Will Still Have Old Look," *Dallas Morning News*, January 26, 1995 sec. Today, p. 3C

<sup>167</sup> "Medallion Is Going Multiple: City loses last 1st-run, one-screen film theater," *Dallas Morning News*, March 21, 1986 sec. News, p. 27A.

across I-75 from NorthPark Center in 1975 and operated it under the names “NorthPark III & IV” and “NorthPark East.”<sup>168</sup> This location was booked independently from the original and did not share the same personnel until the mid-1980s, and as such, it did not share any more history with the Cinemas at NorthPark than other locations operated by the General Cinema Corporation at the time (such as the Irving or the Valley View).

### *Conclusion*

At the end of NorthPark’s second decade of operation, the theater had been both popular on a local level and influential on a national one. The great twin had survived while the competition around it had faltered because of their ability to exploit shifts in booking strategies and their focus on the product. This was the first time in its history that the success of NorthPark could not be explained by exclusive runs, but by the fact that they were preferred by customers when given a choice.

But the industry was about to change directions once again. Vertical integration was about to return for the first time in fifty years and with it, an incredibly aggressive construction boom. This new group of theaters would move NorthPark’s direct competition within walking distance and finally consolidate the new central zone/theater row along Central Expressway.

### *Movies Exhibited at NorthPark 1975–1984*

#### *1975*

- |                             |                       |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Funny Lady               | 6. Fantasia (RR)      |
| 2. Shampoo                  | 7. Camelot (RR)       |
| 3. Nashville                | 8. Hearts of the West |
| 4. The Fortune              | 9. The Hindenburg     |
| 5. Three Days of the Condor | 10. Lucky Lady        |

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<sup>168</sup> Philip Wuntch, “New NorthPark Twins to Open,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 8, 1974, sec. A, p. 20.

1976

1. Gable and Lombard
2. Family Plot
3. Hawmps!
4. Blue Birds
5. Midway
6. Harry and Walter Go to New York
7. The Tenant

8. The Devil Is a Woman
9. The Lion in Winter
10. Face to Face
11. Led Zeppelin
12. The Front
13. Network
14. A Star Is Born

1977

1. Airport '77
2. The Eagle Has Landed
3. Cross of Iron
4. Star Wars

5. Rollercoaster
6. Mac Arthur
7. Looking for Mr. Goodbar
8. Turning Point

1978

1. House Calls
2. Omen II
3. Heaven Can Wait
4. The Eyes of Laura Mars
5. Interiors

6. Magic
7. Watership Down
8. Superman
9. Invasion of the Body Snatchers

1979

1. The Deer Hunter
2. A Little Romance
3. Main Event
4. Lost and Found
5. Just You and Me Kid
6. The Seduction of Joe Tynan
7. The Life of Brian

8. Danny
9. Sleeping Beauty
10. Yanks
11. The Rose
12. Kramer vs. Kramer
13. The Black Hole

1980

1. Scarlet Love
2. Simon
3. Being There
4. The Empire Strikes Back
5. The Shining
6. The Blue Lagoon
7. Divine Madness

8. One Trick Pony
9. The Great Santini
10. The Stunt Man
11. Seems Like Old Times
12. Private Benjamin
13. First Family

1981

1. Tribute
2. All Night Long
3. Eyewitness
4. Coal Miner's Daughter
5. Breaker Morant
6. Lion of the Desert
7. Atlantic City
8. Outland
9. History of the World Part One
10. Arthur
11. Zorro, The Gay Blade
12. Eye of the Needle
13. Body Heat
14. Prince of the City
15. Rich and Famous
16. Time Bandits
17. Arthur (RR)
18. Buddy, Buddy
19. Absence of Malice

1982

1. On Golden Pond
2. Chariots of Fire
3. Annie
4. E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial
5. Pink Floyd: The Wall
6. Jinxed
7. Days of Heaven
8. Fame
9. Reds
10. Fiddler on the Roof
11. Sophie's Choice
12. Still of the Night

1983

1. The Chosen
2. The Personals
3. Gandhi
4. Max Dugan Returns
5. Return of the Jedi
6. War Games
7. Brainstorm
8. The Right Stuff
9. Star 60
10. Yentl
11. Silkwood

1984

1. Blame It on Rio
2. Tender Mercies
3. Police Academy
4. Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes
5. Making the Grade
6. Terms of Endearment
7. Streets of Fire
8. Gremlins
9. Rhinestone
10. The NeverEnding Story
11. Red Dawn
12. Irreconcilable Differences
13. Amadeus
14. American Dreamer
15. 2010
16. Dune

Table 6 - Movie Theaters in Operation 1975–1984

Village 1935 - 1975/Present	[Hatched pattern]												
Casa Linda 1945 - 1973/1999	[Hatched pattern]												
Granada 1946-1977	[Pink]			[White]									
Delman Theatre 1947 - 1978	[Green]				[White]								
Inwood 1947 - 1980/Present	[Pink]					[Hatched pattern]							
NORTHPARK 1&2 1965-1988	[Blue]												
Lochwood 1966-1982	[Red]												
Medallion 1969-1986/2001	[Grey]												
LOEWS 1969 - 1974/1982	[Hatched pattern]						[White]						
Northwood IV 1970-1984	[Pink]												
Park Cities Twin 1972 - 1979/1982	[Red]					[Hatched pattern]							
NorthPark 3 & 4 1974 - 1998	[Orange]												
GCC Valley View 1975-1991	[Purple]												
Loews Park Central 1977-1996	[White]			[Orange]									
GCC Prestonwood 1979-1998	[White]					[Olive]							
Skillman 1979-1998	[White]					[Purple]							
UA Prestonwood 1980-1997/2007	[White]					[Red]							
GCC Galleria 1982-2000	[White]					[Yellow]							
Caruth Plaza 1 & 2 1984 - 1992	[White]												
UA 8 South 1984-1999	[White]											[Pink]	
	1975					1980							1985



## Chapter 5

### Industry Expansion and the Return of Vertical Integration, 1985–1994

There have been some fundamental industry changes which we think will enhance the long-term attractiveness of the first-run movie exhibition business. These changes involve the vertical integration of film production companies with theatrical exhibition and the increased importance of the home video market."<sup>169</sup>

—General Cinema Annual Report 1986

The exhibition industry experienced another multiscreen construction boom during the mid-1980s that was as prolific as it was counterintuitive.<sup>170</sup> This time, movie theaters doubled in size from the usual twin, triple, or quad to an average of between six and eight screens at each location. Exhibition chains expanded deeper into suburban markets in a search for greater profits at a time when box office sales had become stagnant. This chapter will focus on the underlying national causes for this massive building boom as well as the effects that these causes had on the theaters that immediately surrounded the Cinemas at NorthPark 1 and 2 (by this time, General Cinema had discontinued using the roman numerals in the name as they found that it was confusing and outdated).<sup>171</sup>

#### *Industry Expansion – National*

The second chapter of this thesis examined the introduction of third generation theaters, like the Cinemas at NorthPark, as a direct reaction to the Paramount Decrees. The end of the vertical integration between the distribution and exhibition tiers had created a financial crisis for both sides of the industry and forced a new economical approach. New theater chains, specifically American Multi-Cinema and General Cinema Corporation, who were not former “Big Five” companies, were able to create an original business model based on multiple screens with smaller auditoriums as a way to reduce costs in this new climate.

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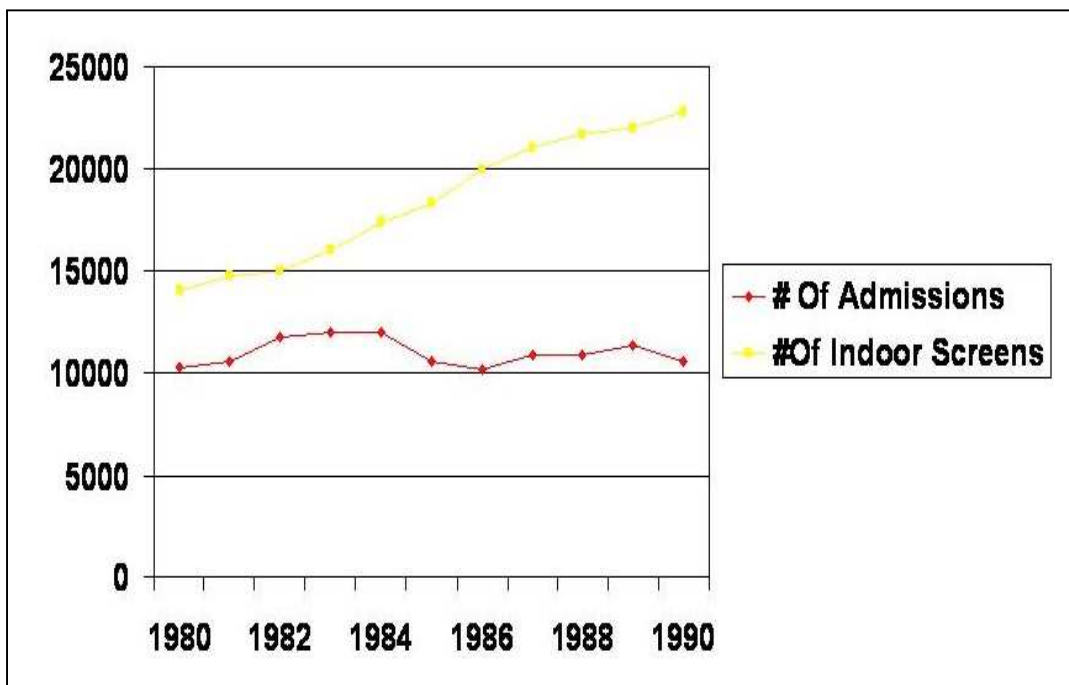
<sup>169</sup> “General Cinema Annual Report 1986,” booklet, 1986, in author's possession.

<sup>170</sup> Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 87.

<sup>171</sup> Philip Wuntch, “The Return of the Splendid Movie Theater,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 19, 1987.

The situation began to change in the 1980s as the fourth generation of theaters began to be built. These new cinemas not only had even more auditoriums, but the rooms were larger with more seats and there was a renewed focus on aesthetics and customer comfort. It is interesting to note that these new cinemas were not built in response to an increase in demand for movies on the part of the general public. In fact, as is shown in the chart below, the number of domestic admissions remained relatively stagnant throughout the decade, reaching its lowest point in 1985. Curiously, theater construction, which had matched the trend of ticket sales until about 1982, exploded at a time when admissions had leveled off. The number of theater screens in the United States continued to climb throughout the 1980s, with an increase of 57% by the end of the decade.<sup>172</sup>

Table 7 - Total of US Box Office Admissions and Indoor Screens 1980–1990

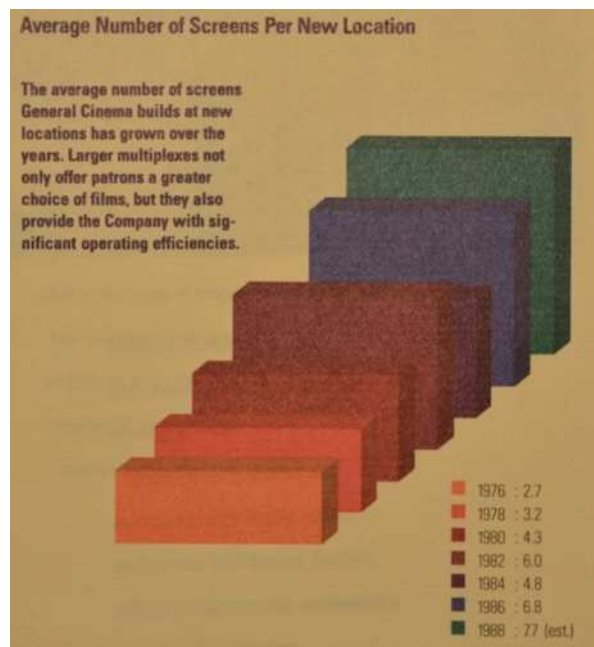


<sup>172</sup> Jim Kozak, ed., *The 2006-2007 Encyclopedia of Exhibition* (North Hollywood: National Association of Theatre Owners, 2006), 242, 270.

There are three complementary theories that address the disproportionate expansion of cinema building during this period of stagnation and decline. First, exhibition analyst Thomas Guback argues that a changing approach to business at the local retail level that was the main factor in the building boom.<sup>173</sup> He points out that shopping mall developers were seeking to add movie theaters to their complexes as a way to draw traffic to their other stores and that there is a direct correlation between the rise in theater construction during this period and the number of shopping centers and malls being built. Furthermore, the theater chains were enticed by favorable leasing arrangements with these retail developers, which meant that the up-front capital required from an exhibitor was minimal.<sup>174</sup>

The second theory for this expansion was basic cost cutting (both at the corporate and individual theater level) and the attempt to maximize the usefulness of resources that has always been present in the industry. Theater owners were expanding on the corporate

Table 8 - Average Number of Screens Per New General Cinema Location



<sup>173</sup> Thomas Guback, "The Evolution of the Motion Picture Theatre Business in the 1980s," *The Journal of Communication* 37, no. 2 (1987), p. 60-67.

<sup>174</sup> Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 87.

level by building more theater locations within a small geographical area so they could consolidate film bookers, advertising personnel, and district directors into defined regions.<sup>175</sup> Furthermore, the reason theater owners sought to increase the number of screens on the individual theater level was the same reasoning that brought the twin to Dallas in the first place. Owners hoped to make use of a single parking lot, concession stand, and set of bathrooms while at the same time offering their patrons either a wider range of film selections or the convenience of a greater number of showtimes.<sup>176</sup> This time, however, it was up to eight cinema screens sharing one set of requisite facilities, not just two as was the case with a twin. For perspective, this gave patrons the ability to see eight different films in one building—nearing the number of options they would have had on “Theatre Row” forty years before. The difference was that this time all of the screens would be owned by one company and serviced by a single concession stand, management team, and projection staff, which eliminated redundancy and greatly reduced overall operating expenses.

The third factor for this expansion is attributable (somewhat ironically) to a former screen actor who was active during the peak of the palace era, Ronald Reagan.<sup>177</sup> When Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency in early 1981, he brought with him a laissez fair economic policy that was vital to reenergizing the struggling domestic movie exhibition industry. The hands-off policy of the Reagan Justice Department meant that a consolidation of exhibition and distribution resembling the one that existed prior to the 1948 Paramount Decrees was possible in theory, but it had to be tested first. Because the “Big Five” (Paramount, Fox, MGM, RKO, and Warner Brothers) were actual signatories of the anti-trust legislation in 1948, none of them could be the first to try out the new climate.

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<sup>175</sup> Pruitt, 140.

<sup>176</sup> “Film Exhibition After Television – Exhibition – Movie, TV, Cinema, Role,” last modified 2015, accessed February 17, 2015, <http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Criticism-Ideology/Exhibition-FILM-EXHIBITION-AFTER-TELEVISION.html>.

<sup>177</sup> Pruitt, 184.

Instead, it would be the relatively smaller companies of MCA (which owned Universal Pictures) and Cineplex Odeon that would be the first to participate in the rush back to vertical integration when MCA bought almost half of the Cineplex Odeon theater chain for \$159 million.<sup>178</sup> After seeing that MCA was able to complete the acquisition without significant government intervention, the other major studios sought to add an exhibition arm under their corporate umbrella. Paramount bought Mann's Theaters, Trans-Lux, and the Festival chain; Columbia/Tri-Star purchased Loews; and Warner Brothers acquired the Paramount chain of cinemas.<sup>179</sup> It took almost eleven years for the practice of vertical integration to be broken up in the 1950s after the Paramount ruling was handed down and only five years for it to return after the rules were eased.<sup>180</sup>

This expansion even pleased the distributors who had not acquired theaters, as they understood how this new building boom would attract a greater audience and would provide a greater number of screens to accommodate the ever-expanding slate of films.<sup>181</sup> Exhibitors that were not involved with these new ownership arrangements also benefited, as they were now able to grow their brand in a way that they could not have in the previous thirty years. In fact, in their annual corporate report for 1986, General Cinema welcomed these vertically integrated players saying:

Film company ownership of theaters should not present a formidable threat to our circuit. If a film company favors a theater in which it has equity interest, that will drive its competitors to seek other theaters to play their films. There are typically only two to four multiplexes (12 to 14 screens) in a given film zone. If one of them is playing the films of a particular distributor, the other multiplexes will have less competition in securing films from the remaining distributors. Therefore, for every film that we have less chance to play, there will be another freed up for which we will have a greater chance. Therefore, on balance, we expect the vertical integration of film production to have very little impact on General Cinema's ability to secure an adequate share of all the film product available.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 97.

<sup>179</sup> Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 98.

<sup>180</sup> Pruitt, 185.

<sup>181</sup> Leonard Klady, "Exhibits' Expansion Buys Distributors," *Variety*, March 20-26, 1995, p.7,16.

<sup>182</sup> "General Cinema Annual Report 1986," 21.

The General Cinema Corporation was unique in its approach as it went against the vertical integration trend and opted instead for a program of investment and diversification. Despite dabbling in a couple of movie-making ventures in the mid-1970s through a company called "Associated General Films,"<sup>183</sup> General Cinema had always decided that it was best to stay out of the business of making movies and focus on acquiring businesses in other industries. These ventures included radio and TV stations, department chain Neiman Marcus, book publisher Harcourt Brace, furniture retailer Alpert's, as well as a hugely successful Pepsi bottling franchise.<sup>184</sup> The bottling operation, known as General Cinema Beverages, was so lucrative that the 1986 annual report shows the beverage division's revenue about 2:1 over the theater division's revenue with earnings closer to 3:1.<sup>185</sup>

#### *Theater Expansion – Dallas*

Despite the optimism that General Cinema showed in their annual report about potential product allocations after the return of vertical integration, these new theaters did end up competing for the same territory which resulted in oversaturated "war zones." The most notable of these were Woodland Hills, California, Las Vegas, Nevada, and, of course, NorthPark's territory in North Dallas.<sup>186</sup>

Though the competitive "central zone" around NorthPark was still regarded as one of the strongest grossing areas in the entire country,<sup>187</sup> the early and mid-1980s were a relatively quiet period for this area. The Inwood, UA Cine, and the Medallion, which had been NorthPark's primary competition throughout the 1970s, were no longer serious competitors for the mainstream, first-run crowds. The Inwood and UA Cine had both shifted

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<sup>183</sup> These films included *Capricorn One*, *March or Die*, *The Domino Principle*, *The Eagle Has Landed*, and *The Cassandra Crossing*.

<sup>184</sup> Pruitt, 86, 170, 211, 88, and 67.

<sup>185</sup> "General Cinema Annual Report," 26.

<sup>186</sup> Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 124.

<sup>187</sup> Philip Wuntch, "Projecting a Boom – Movie theater complexes planning to bring at least 100 new screens to Dallas area in '95," *Dallas Morning News*, January, 1 1995, sec. News, p. 1A.

to art and foreign programming while the Medallion had been split into five screens and become a discount theater.

As such, General Cinema's dominance in the area remained completely unchecked throughout much of this period. As of 1985, the only theaters showing first-run movies in the central zone were the NorthPark 1 & 2, the NorthPark 3 & 4, and a new theater General Cinema bought from Plitt located almost exactly between the two NorthPark Cinema buildings. This theater was located at the northeast corner of Park Lane and Central Expressway and was named the Caruth Plaza 1 & 2.<sup>188</sup>



Figure 24 - AMC Glen Lakes

The first challenger to General Cinema's dominance in the area would not appear until 1988 in the form of the AMC NorthPark.<sup>189</sup> The appropriation of the name "NorthPark" was an obvious attempt to capitalize on the popularity of the more established General Cinema location as well as the NorthPark Center in general. The eight screen AMC version,

<sup>188</sup> Philip Wuntch, "Finding a Seat Will Get Easier," *Dallas Morning News*, November 13, 1993, sec. C.

<sup>189</sup> Steve Brown, "AMC Plans N. Dallas Film Complex," *Dallas Morning News*, April 28, 1988, sec. D.

which was located across the highway and an exit to the north, eventually accepted that this only led to confusion and officially changed the name of the theater to “AMC Glen Lakes” (which was the name of the shopping and business development of which it was a part) a mere two months after opening.<sup>190</sup>



Figure 25 - United Artists Plaza

In 1989, the United Artists Theater Chain (also known as UATC, and no relation to the United Artists distribution company) became a competitor in the central zone once again when they built a theater directly between the General Cinema NorthPark and the AMC Glen Lakes (the name change was official by this time).<sup>191</sup> This new theater also opened with some confusion surrounding its name. Although there had been numerous UA theaters in the city prior to this new ten screen, it had been given the name “The United Artists Theater,”

<sup>190</sup> Philip Wuntch, "An Elegant Addition to Theater Row – UA NorthPark Complex Joins the Circle of Cinemas," *Dallas Morning News*, May 23, 1989, sec. C, p. 1.

<sup>191</sup> Philip Wuntch, "Theaters Bring Back Comfort and Style," *Dallas Morning News*, June 11, 1989, sec. C.



which did not differentiate it from other theaters with that name. This theater's name would eventually be changed to the "UA Plaza" in order to eliminate this confusion.<sup>192</sup>

After being unimpressed with the theaters coming out of the 1960s and 1970s, *Dallas Morning News* film critic Philip Wuntch heralded these new cinemas and their ilk as a renaissance in theater building. Since starting his career at the now defunct *Dallas Times Herald* in 1968, Philip Wuntch often wrote commentaries on the exhibition industry by way of pieces on new theater openings or old theater closings. As such, Wuntch is one of the best resources on the local cinema-going experience during the last half of the twentieth century.

Reviews that he wrote around the time of the opening of The United Artists Theater and the AMC Glen Lakes highlight their "ornate chandeliers," "luxurious drapes," and "attractive neon."<sup>193</sup> In addition to the aesthetic changes, the theaters began to focus more on the manner in which movies were shown, with a specific importance being placed on picture and sound quality. Many of these theaters advertised better viewing angles, clearer sound, and less sound bleed-through between auditoriums.<sup>194</sup> Wuntch would later admit that despite the emphasis that these new locations put on the sound experience, the most powerful sound system in the city was still found in Cinema I at the Cinemas at NorthPark.<sup>195</sup>

The central zone was not the only area in Dallas to see new theaters at this time. The major exhibition chains were expanding their suburban footprint at a very quick pace. Between 1985 and 1994, there were sixteen new cinema locations opened up in the areas around Dallas and the immediate suburbs, a pace of a new theater almost every six months.<sup>196</sup> These new locations accounted for 138 new screens over sixteen locations, many of which were built in new, highly competitive suburban zones. The most notable of

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<sup>192</sup> Philip Wuntch, "An Elegant Addition to Theater Row – UA NorthPark Complex Joins the Circle of Cinemas," sec. C, p.1.

<sup>193</sup> Philip Wuntch, "The Return of the Splendid Movie Theater – Chains Realize That Atmosphere Counts, Too," *Dallas Morning News*, June 19, 1987.

<sup>194</sup> Wuntch, "An Elegant Addition to Theater Row."

<sup>195</sup> Philip Wuntch, "Farewell to the Meager-plex: New Movie Houses Entertain in Grand Style," *Dallas Morning News*, April 5, 1997, sec. Today, p. 5C.

<sup>196</sup> Data collected from [www.cinematour.com](http://www.cinematour.com) and [www.cinematreasures.com](http://www.cinematreasures.com).

these were the Gus Thomasson area of Mesquite, South Arlington, Hurst, and Plano as populations settled in suburban areas away from Dallas proper.

Apart from the Loews location at Preston Park in Plano, all of the new screens were built by either AMC, GCC, or local companies O'Neil Theatres (the West End 10) or a Plano based startup, Cinemark Theaters. This meant that at the time, the Dallas market was not directly affected by the companies that had become vertically integrated, but were still trying to keep up with the national trend. Another similarity that these theaters shared was their brief existences, with most not keeping the doors open through the twenty year mark (for reasons that we will see in the following chapter). Of the sixteen theaters mentioned here, only two are still open today (the Cinemark Grand Prairie 16 and the Lewisville 8) with the average lifespan being right about fifteen years.

### *Stagnation and Decline*

The chart on the second page of this chapter demonstrates the leveling-off trend in movie ticket sales throughout the 1980s.<sup>197</sup> The early 1990s were even worse. 1991's gross total was down 8% from 1990, and the following year it slipped down another two points.<sup>198</sup> This 10% downturn resulted in one of the worst periods in movie exhibition since the previously discussed bottoming out that occurred in 1971.<sup>199</sup>

This dip in national attendance did not have a huge impact on the Cinemas at NorthPark. The theater actually saw their numbers rise and fall over the period, which was largely based on the movies they were showing. Overall, NorthPark was able to weather the national epidemic of the time. More importantly, it demonstrates that after the novelty of the two newcomers to the area wore off (the AMC Glen Lakes and the UA Plaza), the customers were still choosing to patronize to the General Cinema.

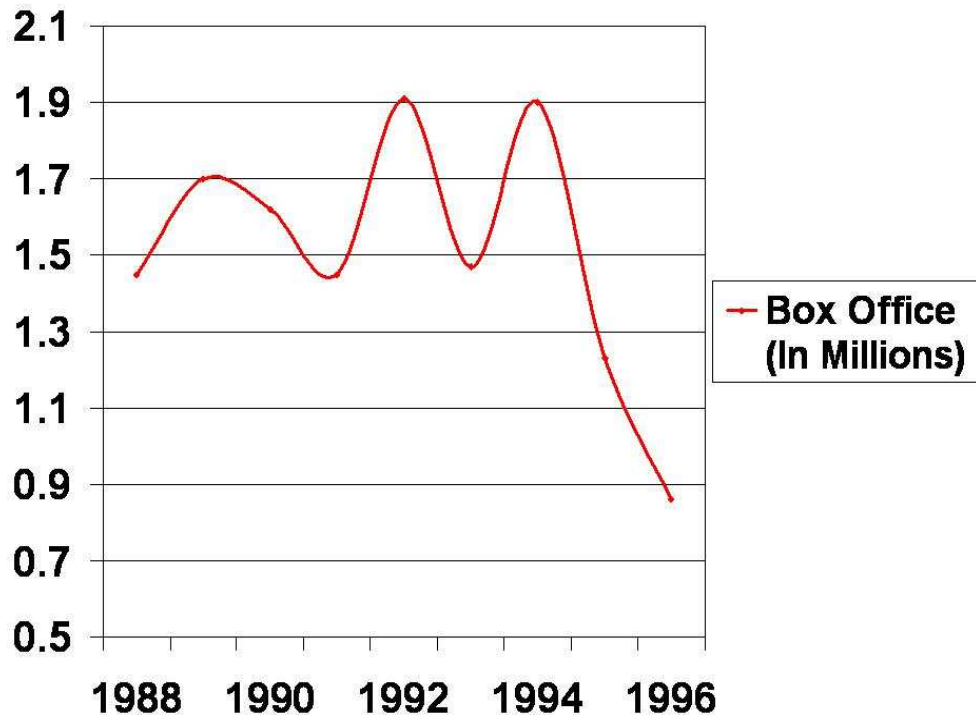
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<sup>197</sup> Kozak, ed., *The 2006-2007 Encyclopedia of Exhibition*, 242, 270.

<sup>198</sup> Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 73.

<sup>199</sup> Edgerton, 50.

Table 9 - NorthPark Box Office Grosses 1988–1996



The ticket sale decline was only one of the issues facing the exhibition industry in the early 1990s. The building boom that had nearly doubled the domestic screen count was not able to positively affect the number of people seeing movies. In fact, the enormous amount of energy and capital that went into the closure, construction, and refurbishment of the theater sites caused an increase in ticket prices and film rental rates.<sup>200</sup>

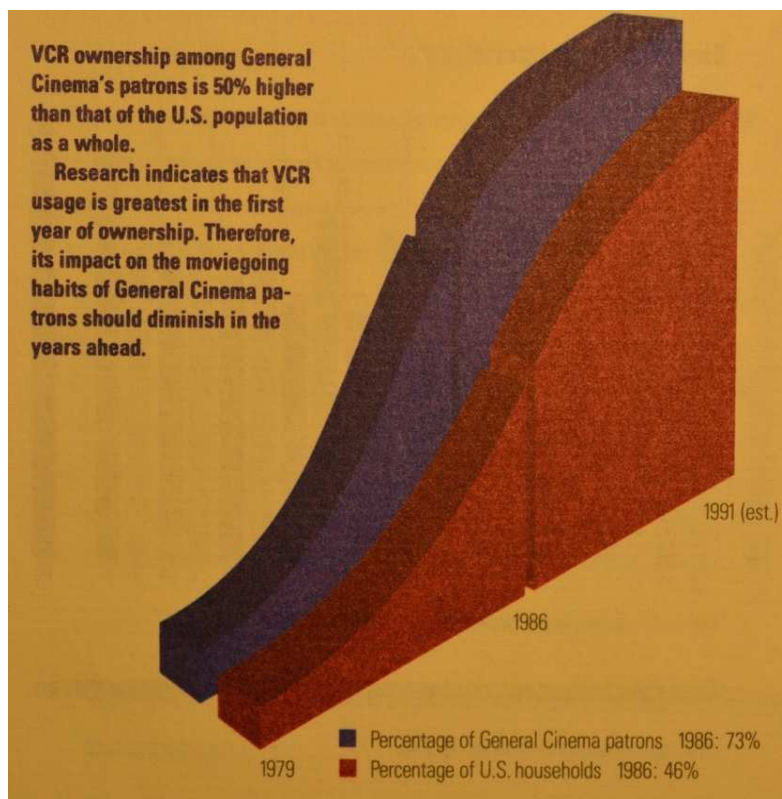
Casual observers often point to the rise of alternative media options in the late 1980s, such as pay TV and VHS rental outlets, as a way to explain the decline at the box office. This was not the case. Since the distributors now owned most of the film outlets in the country, they were not as concerned about making a profit at the box office, but were looking at the long-term return potential on a movie. Because of these new media options, distributors were able to pre-sell the TV and video rights to films before the movie's release

<sup>200</sup> Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 101.

as a way to offset production costs.<sup>201</sup> They had effectively gotten around blind booking laws by having newer, lower profile means of home exhibition shoulder the costs of the movie before it was even made. Just as when they were using blind and block booking before, they were able to funnel that money back into production in order to make the higher budget movies that more people wanted to see.

Furthermore, General Cinema did a survey of their customers in order to see how many of their frequent patrons owned VCRs. They found that 73% of their customers owned the home video format, almost twice the adoption rate in the United States at the time. This lead them to believe their customers were “more discriminating and more sophisticated” cinema patrons and that watching films at home helped immerse them in film culture.<sup>202</sup>

Table 10 - VCR Ownership Among GCC Patrons



<sup>201</sup> Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation 1980-1996* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 28.

<sup>202</sup> “General Cinema Says VCRs Are a Help to the Exhibition Biz,” *Variety*, Jan 14, 1987, p. 48.

Although GCC was incorrect about the impact that vertical integration would have on print allocation and theater competition, future writers have agreed with their argument concerning the positive role of the VHS player in creating film culture immersion. Leading film business analyst Charles Acland has argued that it was around this time that the culture of “cinema-going” started to return.<sup>203</sup> With this, the population becomes so involved in the culture of films and talking about them that it starts to get caught up in “insiderism.”

Insiderism occurs when the general public starts to have an interest in knowing the kind of information that was once reserved for the heads of studios. This information includes budgets, stars, directors, trivia, and behind the scenes gossip.<sup>204</sup> The media also helps fuel this phenomenon as they make the weekend box office grosses one of the top news stories on Sunday<sup>205</sup> so they can be discussed and debated in offices all over the country the following week.<sup>206</sup>

For these reasons, the period of stagnation and decline might have been somewhat attributable to the alternative media options that were becoming available, but just like the introduction of television created a brief downturn in movie admissions in the 1950s, it was only a temporary lull and was necessary in setting up a culture of more constant media consumption.

### *The Movies*

The movie exhibition industry has always relied on the movies that it shows for profitability, and this period was no different. While the NorthPark 1 & 2 had not changed in any significant way from the time that it opened, the industry around the theater had seen drastic shifts. Now, instead of having a regional exclusive on a film, theaters all across DFW

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<sup>203</sup> Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 76.

<sup>204</sup> Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 6, 76.

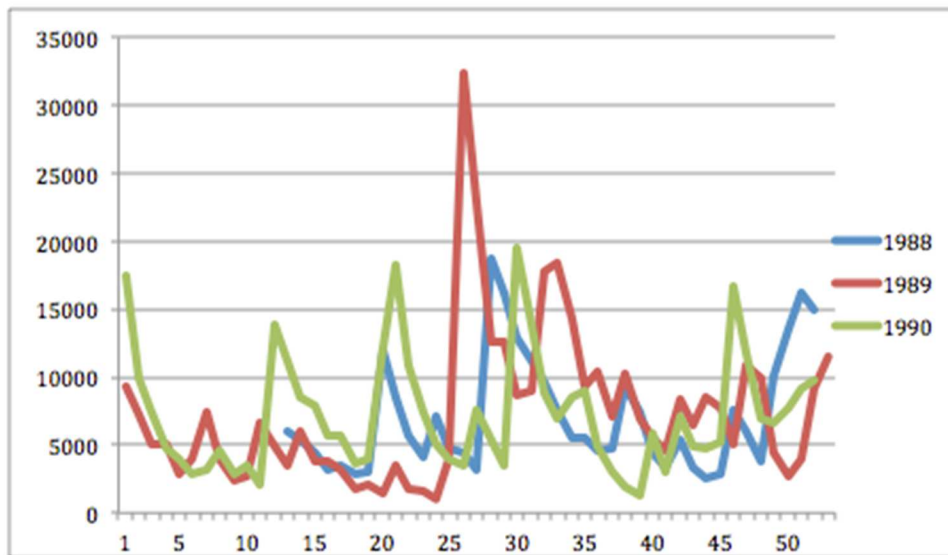
<sup>205</sup> Grosses for Sundays are always estimated and final, revised totals are available on Monday.

<sup>206</sup> Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 4.

were playing the same films as Cinema 1 & 2. Even if people preferred to go to NorthPark, the appeal of proximity often determined that they would go to the theater close to their suburban homes.

Although the NorthPark 1 & 2 was sharing the big movies with its suburban counterparts, it was having to compete for films against newer, local competitors. Only a couple years before in 1985, General Cinema enjoyed dominance over the area with only six screens between three buildings (all owned by GCC). But as of 1990, there were now twenty screens spread out over four buildings located at or near NorthPark, and only two of those buildings were operated by General Cinema. Furthermore, Hollywood product had declined from 470 movies in 1985 to 410 in 1990.<sup>207</sup> If this had been spread evenly across the number of screens, each theater would have opened about twenty films for every screen they had in the building. Under this formula, the Cinemas at NorthPark should have played forty films. Instead, they only exhibited nineteen movies in 1990. The movies that did show,

Table 11 - Weekly Attendance Comparison 1988–1990



<sup>207</sup> Boxofficemojo.com, "Movie Box Office Results by Year, 1980-Present – Box Office Mojo," last modified 2015, accessed January 9, 2015, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/>.

however, tended to be the bigger films, with five of the top ten grossing films from that year playing at NorthPark.<sup>208</sup>

The chart on the previous page shows the turbulent ups and downs for NorthPark in the years following the opening of the AMC Glen Lakes and the UA Plaza. Overall, it appears that 1990 was the most balanced out of the three years in terms of overall attendance, with the low points being about the same as the other years but with more spikes for bigger movies throughout. The absolute peak over this period came on Memorial Day weekend of 1989 when the theater opened Tim Burton's *Batman* on both screens. The total number of patrons for the Friday to Thursday period was 32,446.<sup>209</sup>

*Batman* provides a good example of Acland's insiderism at the theater level since it was playing on both screens and audiences clearly favored seeing the film in Cinema 1. The gross box office take for the week in Cinema 2 was \$45,465 compared to \$108,425 for Cinema 1.<sup>210</sup> Many patrons were aware of Cinema 2's larger screen and more impressive sound system and decided to see those showtimes at a ratio of over 2:1. Other individual movies had newsworthy moments during this period. These stories didn't reflect changes in the larger movie industry or greater cultural shifts, but were important to the history of the theater itself.

There were two specific filmmakers whose films and presence left their mark on the aging cinema. The first of these was the return of *Benji* creator, Joe Camp, for the world premiere screening of *Benji the Hunted* on June 4, 1987. The Cinemas at NorthPark had hosted numerous world premieres and advance screenings before, but this one came with unique fanfare. The premiere included massive tents in the parking lot, stretch limousines, and even an appearance by Jeffery Katzenberg, the chairman of Walt Disney Studios at the

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<sup>208</sup> Wikipedia, "1990 In Film," last modified 2015, accessed March 1, 2015, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1990\\_in\\_film](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1990_in_film). The top five films that were shown at NorthPark were *Pretty Woman*, *Back to the Future: Part III*, *Presumed Innocent*, *Home Alone*, and *Kindergarten Cop*.

<sup>209</sup> "General Cinema Theaters Weekly Summary 3/99 to 12/92," spreadsheet, n.d., in author's possession.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

time. General Cinema, proud of its role in creating the Benji franchise, awarded the film's namesake with an engraved star outside the entrance to Cinema 1.<sup>211</sup> This was the only film or individual to ever receive such an honor at NorthPark. After the premiere, the film had a two-week exclusive at NorthPark before its national opening.<sup>212</sup>

Oliver Stone was another filmmaker who added to the history of NorthPark with his films. The first time was on January 24, 1987, when the theater was evacuated during a screening of *Platoon*. During a particularly graphic and violent scene in this film about the Vietnam War, a woman began spraying people with mace while yelling, "You've got to see what they did; you've got to see how the war started!" Two security guards and one customer were sprayed directly and the remaining fumes were enough to force the full evacuation of the theater.<sup>213</sup> Oliver Stone would visit the theater himself on December 19, 1991, for a premiere screening of *JFK*, which had been shot in and around Dallas.

The addition of digital sound to 35mm film was also important to films and how they were viewed during this period. When digital sound first premiered in 1992 with the release of *Batman Returns*, this was one of the first theaters chosen for the new Dolby SRD format (digital sound printed on the film). In 1993, they were also one of the first adopters of the DTS digital sound format for *Jurassic Park* (digital sound playback from synchronous CDs). There were two other competing digital sound formats around this time that the theater could have chosen to install but did not due to reliability concerns. Cinema Digital Sound (CDS) was created with no analog backup and was deemed unusable by the studios soon after, with only nine titles ever released in the format.<sup>214</sup> Sony Dynamic Digital Sound (SDDS) was also available around this same time, but suffered from severe playback issues as prints aged.

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<sup>211</sup> Philip Wuntch, "Benji Graces Debut of Latest Film," *Dallas Morning News*, sec. News, p. 26A.

<sup>212</sup> Jane Sumner, "Benji to Bask in the Dallas Spotlight," *Dallas Morning News*, sec. Arts & Entertainment, p. 2C.

<sup>213</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, January 25, 1987, p. 33A.

<sup>214</sup> Wikipedia, "Cinema Digital Sound," last modified 2015, accessed March 5, 2015, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema\\_Digital\\_Sound](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_Digital_Sound).



### *Conclusion*

At the end of 1994, the Cinemas at NorthPark completed its third full decade of operation. Over the previous ten years, it had been able to overcome competition from the new fourth generation theaters that had been built in the central zone as well as competition from substitution forms of entertainment such as pay TV and VHS. Even the threat of having to go up against the newly integrated distribution/exhibition chains did little to affect NorthPark's business or popularity. But, as was the case with all other periods of stagnation and decline in the exhibition industry, the conditions were in place for another generational shift.

### *Movies Exhibited at NorthPark 1985–1994*

#### *1985*

- |                        |                        |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. The Killing Fields  | 10. Back to the Future |
| 2. Mrs. Soffel         | 11. Mad Max            |
| 3. Fantasia            | 12. American Flyers    |
| 4. Mask                | 13. After Hours        |
| 5. Return of the Jedi  | 14. Rainbow Brite      |
| 6. Ladyhawke           | 15. Rocky IV           |
| 7. Brewster's Millions | 16. The Color Purple   |
| 8. The Goonies         | 17. Out of Africa      |
| 9. A View to a Kill    |                        |

#### *1986*

- |                    |                         |
|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Cobra           | 7. Extremities          |
| 2. Poltergeist III | 8. Blue Velvet          |
| 3. Legal Eagles    | 9. The Name of the Rose |
| 4. American Anthem | 10. An American Tail    |
| 5. Aliens          | 11. True Stories        |
| 6. Howard the Duck | 12. Crimes of the Heart |

1987

1. Brighton Beach
2. The Mission
3. Platoon
4. Lethal Weapon
5. Raising Arizona
6. Hannah and Her Sisters
7. The Secret of My Success
8. Benji the Hunted
9. Harry and the Hendersons
10. Dragnet
11. Full Metal Jacket
12. The Living Daylights
13. Born in East LA
14. Prayer for the Dying
15. The Pickup Artist
16. Rosary Murders
17. Baby Boom
18. The Princess Bride
19. Cross My Heart
20. Stacking
21. Date with an Angel
22. Dancers
23. Empire of the Sun
24. Wall Street

1988

1. Cry Freedom
2. Barfly
3. Good Morning Vietnam
4. Off Limits
5. Stand and Deliver
6. The Milagro Beanfield War
7. Willow
8. The Lady in White
9. The Great Outdoors
10. Phantasm II
11. Die Hard
12. Midnight Run
13. Moon Over Parador
14. Gorillas in the Mist
15. Clara's Heart
16. The Land Before Time
17. Cocoon 2
18. Twins
19. Rain Man

1989

1. The 'Burbs
2. Fletch Lives
3. Dream Team
4. Roadhouse
5. Batman
6. Peter Pan
7. The Abyss
8. Parenthood
9. Sea of Love
10. The Fabulous Baker Boys
11. Dad
12. Back to the Future Part II
13. Always

1990

1. Born on the 4th of July
2. Men Don't Leave
3. Pretty Woman
4. Opportunity Knocks
5. The Guardian
6. Bird on a Wire
7. Back to the Future Part III
8. The Jetsons
9. The Adventures of Ford Fairlane
10. Presumed Innocent

11. Problem Child
12. Darkman
13. Millers Crossing
14. White Palace
15. Reversal of Fortune
16. Home Alone
17. Havana
18. Kindergarten Cop
19. The Bonfire of the Vanities

1991

1. Hamlet
2. Once Around
3. The Hard Way
4. Guilty By Suspicion
5. Marrying Man
6. A Kiss Before Dying
7. Spartacus
8. Switch
9. Backdraft
10. Robin Hood

11. Dying Young
12. Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey
13. Mobsters
14. Pure Luck
15. The Commitments
16. Paradise
17. Little Man Tate
18. Cape Fear
19. For the Boys
20. JFK

1992

1. Fried Green Tomatoes
2. White Man Can't Jump
3. The Babe
4. Beethoven
5. Far and Away
6. Batman Returns
7. Housesitter

8. Death Becomes Her
9. 1492
10. Sneakers
11. The Last of the Mohicans
12. Captain Ron
13. Aladdin
14. Hoffa

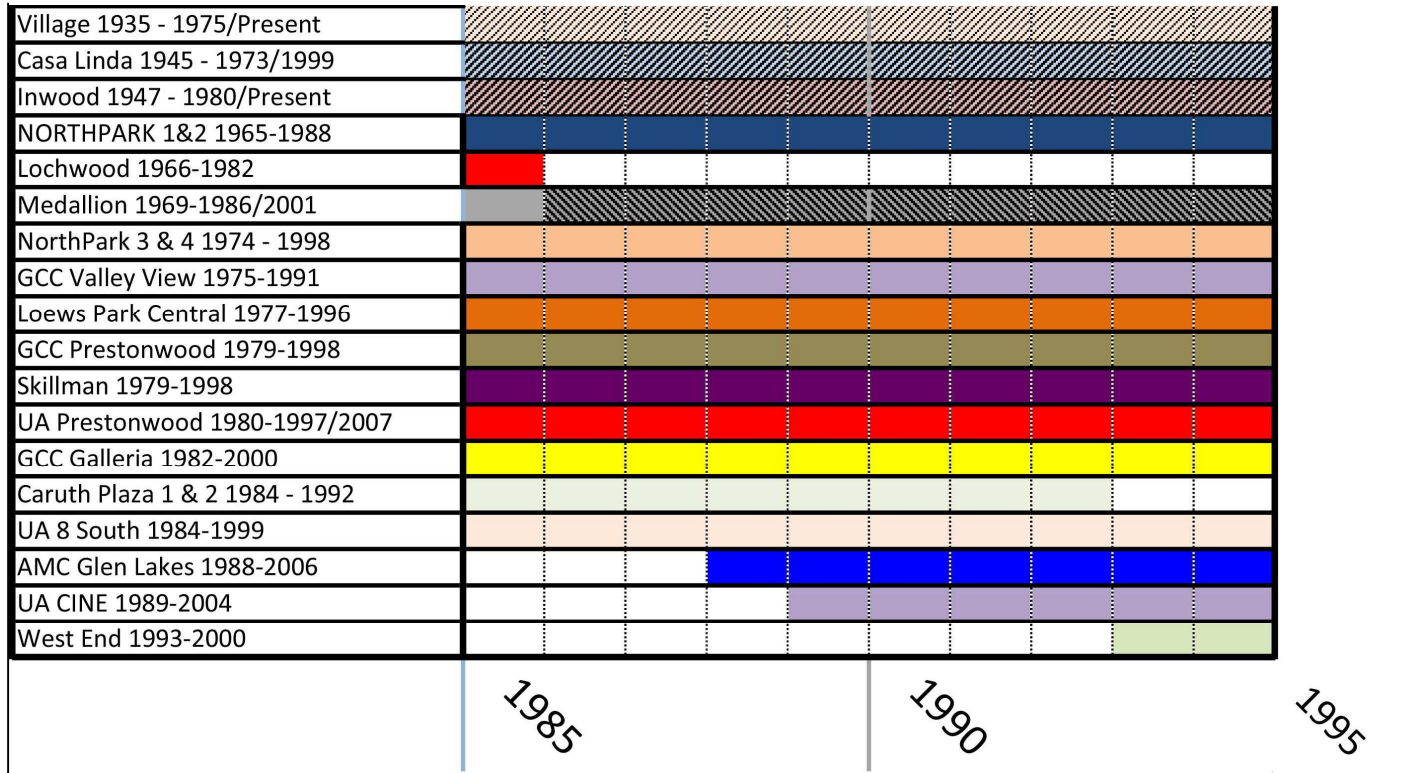
1993

1. Lorenzo's Oil
2. Matinee
3. Cemetery Club
4. Falling Down
5. Mad Dog and Glory
6. Jack the Bear
7. Huck Finn
8. This Boy's Life
9. Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story
10. Splitting Heirs
11. Made in America
12. Jurassic Park
13. Hocus Pocus
14. Heart and Souls
15. True Romance
16. Little Buddha
17. Love and Money
18. The Nightmare Before Christmas
19. Carlito's Way
20. Schindler's List
21. The Pelican Brief

1994

1. In the Name of the Father
2. Greedy
3. The Paper
4. The Flintstones
5. The Cowboy Way
6. The Lion King
7. The Shadow
8. The Client
9. The Little Rascals
10. Quiz Show
11. The River Wild
12. My Fair Lady
13. Love Affair
14. The War
15. Junior
16. Disclosure
17. The Jungle Book

Table 12 - Movie Theaters in Operation 1985–1994



## Chapter 6

### Industry Expansion and Contraction, 1995–1998

Suddenly, or so it appeared, auditoriums expanded, screen size grew, sound systems became clearer and louder, and food choices were more abundant. The tiny multiplex cinemas that swept through the malls in the early 1980s were being consigned to the past.<sup>215</sup>  
—Charles R. Acland

Though there had been numerous shifts in the exhibition industry since the opening of the General Cinema NorthPark in 1965, the Cinema 1 & 2 had been able to maintain relevancy throughout the third and fourth generations of movie theaters. The changes that came with the fifth generation of cinemas would prove to be too much for both the NorthPark theater as well as its parent company. Appropriately, the instigator of this change would occur about six miles west of NorthPark, which was almost the exact amount of distance that separated the NorthPark Cinemas from the downtown locations that it replaced exactly thirty years before.

#### *The Fifth Generation – The Grand Megaplex*

The era of fifth generation theaters began on May 19, 1995, when American Multi-Cinema (AMC) opened the first “megaplex” in the United States, which is defined as a single theater location containing sixteen or more screens.<sup>216</sup> Unlike most of the multiplexes that preceded it, this theater’s name was not created from its location and number of screens; instead AMC appropriated a name from the palace era and simply called it “The Grand.” This was the start of the fifth generation of movie exhibition and was located about seven miles west of the Cinemas at NorthPark.

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<sup>215</sup> Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 85.

<sup>216</sup> Ross Melnick and Andreas Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theaters* (St. Paul, MN: Motorbooks International, 2004), 181.



Figure 26 - AMC The Grand

The AMC Grand was a new approach to cinema building that was more than just an increase in the number of screens. As the first example of this new experiment in theater design, The Grand adopted a futuristic space theme for its lobby, hallways, and individual theater entrances. AMC intended for this to be the symbol of the future of going to movies and wanted the aesthetic to convey that point. This theater was made to be both impressive and convenient, which made it an instant and unparalleled success. The Grand featured twenty-four individual screening rooms with a total capacity of 3,200 seats. The theater also featured stadium seating, wall-to-wall screens, and digital sound—all of which were features that became standard in future theater design. It was such a paradigm shift from the multiplexes of the 1980s that it was thought of as more of a “big box” store than a movie theater. Peter Brown, CEO of AMC, went as far as to say, “It might make sense to think of the movie theater as a superstore of entertainment.” *Dallas Morning News* architecture critic

David Dillon took this idea of retailer one step further saying that these megaplex theaters were “shopping malls adapted for leisure.”<sup>217</sup>

Most of the ideas behind the creation of the megaplex were borrowed from earlier generations of cinemas. The construction of more auditoriums in a single building meant a better use of resources as it could improve on the utilization of a single set of facilities and staff. This idea is no different than what brought twins in the 1960s and multiplexes in the 1980s, but on a much larger scale than had ever been used before. Even the new stadium-style seating was borrowed from the tiered seating rows of balconies in older movie palaces.<sup>218</sup> Don Gregory, AMC’s director of design and development, admitted that this was no coincidence. He stated that “We’ve just taken the balcony and dropped it onto the floor.”<sup>219</sup>

Digital sound was also nothing new as it had been around for about four years by this point, but it was usually only installed in a complex’s largest auditoriums. Once a movie’s popularity began to wane, the film would move down to smaller screening spaces with more diminutive screens and lower quality sound. By equipping all auditoriums with some form of digital sound (SDDS in the case of *The Grand*), the megaplex improved on the audio experience.

The AMC Grand also expanded on the idea of customer choice that had been a part of the history of the cinema experience. In the second generation, customers could travel downtown to see a movie without determining what that movie would be in advance. They could walk down the street, looking at movie posters and showtimes, and find one that they wanted to see. When saturation booking removed the possibility for extended, exclusive runs of a movie, theaters attempted to expand choice by playing a film on multiple screens in the

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<sup>217</sup> David Dillon, “Entertainment Destinations: Are We Having Fun Yet?” *Dallas Morning News*, May 14, 1995, sec. The Arts, p. 1C.

<sup>218</sup> Melnick, 181.

<sup>219</sup> Dillon, “Entertainment Destinations.”



same cinema. This allowed for staggered showtimes, allowing greater flexibility for when a patron could see a film. The megaplex was able to combine the choice of film with choice of showtime. Some patrons were once again deciding on the act of seeing a movie without making the choice of what to see until they got to the cinemas.<sup>220</sup>

When Stanley Durwood opened the Parkway Twin in Kansas City, he intended for the theater to be scalable in its booking structure. According to the *Variety* article announcing its opening in May of 1963, the theater would be able to play a movie in both cinemas if needed or cycle through movies as business demanded, giving patrons more options of what movies to see.<sup>221</sup> The plan for The Grand was to be able to offer more showtimes of the popular films while at the same time dedicating some of the auditoriums to art and foreign films. There was even excitement from the art film distributors that patrons would arrive at the theater to find all of the blockbusters sold out so they would give the smaller films a try. Mark Gill, Miramax's marketing president, said of The Grand:

One night, maybe 20 of the 24 theaters will be sold out, so what will the customers do? They're already there, so they'll try an art film or foreign-language film. They'll come out thinking it wasn't bad at all, even if it was subtitled. And they'll be willing to try another one.<sup>222</sup>

To execute this approach, The Grand opened with *Die Hard With a Vengeance* on four screens so the popular new film could have more showtimes; a selection of films already in release, including *Crimson Tide* and *While You Were Sleeping*; and a few smaller, art films so as to soften some of the anti-megaplex prejudice in the film community. The wide range of art films included *Forget Paris*, *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain*, *My Family*, and *Swimming with Sharks*. They also included foreign films, such as Japan's *Gamera*, China's *God of the Gamblers Part II*, Vietnam's *Tear Drop Pearl*,

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<sup>220</sup> Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 62.

<sup>221</sup> "Downtown-Shopping Center in Tandem," *Variety*, May 29, 1963.

<sup>222</sup> Philip Wuntch, "Grand Ambitions – America's Biggest Movie Multiplex Is Opening in Dallas, with 24 Screens, Stadium-Style Seating and Great Expectations," *Dallas Morning News*, May 14, 1995, sec. The Arts, p. 1C.

and Mexico's *Bride to Be*.<sup>223</sup> This eclectic booking policy lasted exactly one week. The following weekend was Memorial Day weekend (one of the biggest holidays in the movie industry) and AMC wanted to add additional showtimes for newcomers *Casper* and *Braveheart*.<sup>224</sup> Even twenty-four screens were not enough to keep art films on screens.<sup>225</sup>

What truly set this theater apart from the previous generations was not booking practices or amenities; it was location. In every era before this, the theater locations were built in areas of shopping and commerce. The palaces were built downtown, the twins were in or near malls, and the multiplexes were constructed as part of strip malls and shopping centers. The Grand, however, was built in the middle of an industrial park that had no retail stores and only a handful of restaurants in the general area. Instead of being *part* of something, AMC intended on this *being* the destination.<sup>226</sup>

After its first year of operation, The Grand had welcomed three million moviegoers.<sup>227</sup> For perspective, during the same period of time (May 1995 to May 1996) the Cinemas at NorthPark had 237,351 patrons.<sup>228</sup> Although The Grand was able to enjoy roughly twelve times the business as NorthPark over the period, they also had twelve times as many auditoriums. When broken down to a per auditorium, per day number, NorthPark had 325 customers whereas The Grand only had a nominally higher 342.

The success of megaplexes like The Grand came from the same economic theory that brought multiscreen theaters to cities in the first place: the ability to limit facility and staffing costs while serving a greater number of patrons. The chart below examines the

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<sup>223</sup> Philip Wuntch, "Grand Ambitions – America's Biggest Movie Multiplex Is Opening in Dallas, with 24 Screens, Stadium-Style Seating and Great Expectations," *Dallas Morning News*, May 14, 1995, sec. The Arts, p. 1C.

<sup>224</sup> Philip Wuntch, "A Grand Opening – AMC Officials Celebrate the Breaking of Theater-Chain Records by Complex," *Dallas Morning News*, May 28, 1995, sec. The Arts, p. 9C.

<sup>225</sup> The Grand did return to playing art and foreign films when there was room in the schedule, but not as part of a stated booking strategy.

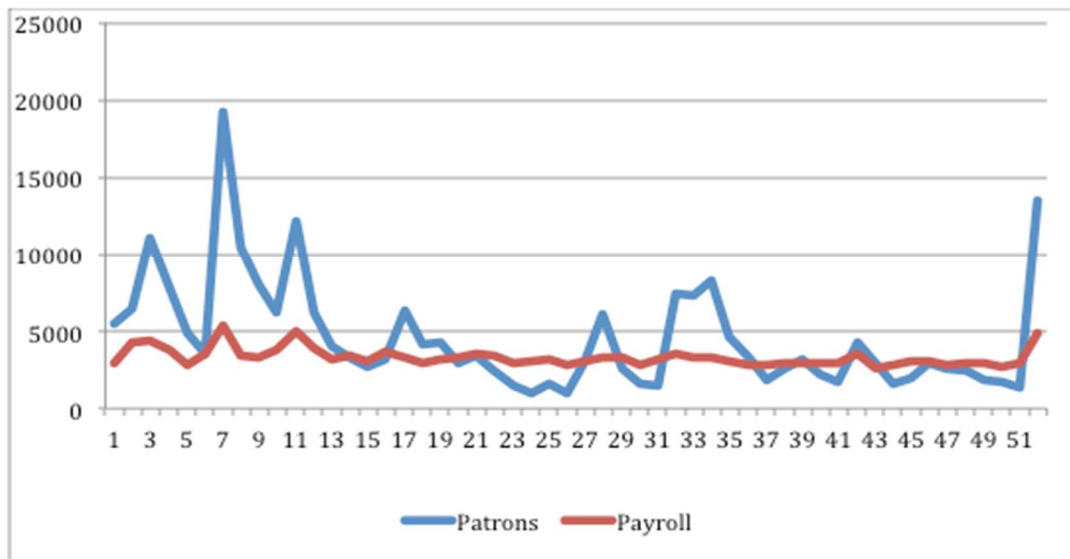
<sup>226</sup> David Dillon, "Entertainment Destinations: Are We Having Fun Yet?" *Dallas Morning News*, May 14, 1995, sec. The Arts, p. 1C.

<sup>227</sup> Kevin Helliher, "Megaplex Movie Theaters Remake Old Habits, and Old Neighborhoods," *Chicago Tribune*, June 8, 1997, accessed March 2, 1995, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1997-06-08/business/9706080089\\_1\\_new-megaplexes-amc-entertainment-theater-business](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1997-06-08/business/9706080089_1_new-megaplexes-amc-entertainment-theater-business) (accessed March 2, 2015).

<sup>228</sup> "Weekly Summary: FY 95 – FY 96," spreadsheet, n.d., in author's possession.

relationship between number of patrons served and the amount of payroll dollars spent at NorthPark during this period. This demonstrates that an expense like payroll remains fairly constant and is only mildly affected by an increase or decrease in customers. A megaplex simply used this model to make use of the same personnel (a general manager and projectionist for example) and was able to have those employees serve a much greater number of patrons at very little additional cost (see week 7 and week 52).

Table 13 - Attendance and Payroll Costs for 1995



Furthermore, a suffering theater is only able to make minor reductions to staffing costs when attendance is low, making it much more difficult for it to stay profitable, especially in the spring and fall when the smaller movies are released.<sup>229</sup> In the chart above, the year starts and ends with Memorial Day Weekend since that is what was used for comparing attendance for NorthPark and The Grand. Weeks 1 through 12 are the summer months, there is a slight jump on week 28 for Thanksgiving, and then a small plateau in weeks 31

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

through 35 for Christmas break. This is a fairly standard representation of the movie theater calendar.

The deployment of fifth generation theaters was very similar to the manner in which the third generation theaters were rolled out in the 1960s. Once one company had provided proof of concept, it became the norm in theater construction, with each exhibitor chain trying to outdo each other in terms of quantity. The trend that started in 1995 with The Grand was no different than the generational shifts that came before it. In 1965, the suburban multiscreens were forcing the closure and remodeling of the palace theaters. In 1985, the original multiscreens were replaced with a building boom of newer and larger versions. In 1995, the newer multiplexes were demolished in favor of the megaplex.

#### *NorthPark in the Fifth Generation*

There is no doubt that the Cinemas at NorthPark continued to be popular after the introduction of the megaplexes, but the way in which they operated had changed significantly. The year 1996 was filled with a slate of films that mixed wide releases with studio-backed art product. Of the last three years of operation, 1997 was the most important in terms of historical significance. Not only was it the last full year of operation, but it was also a return to the films and four concepts that had made the theater stand out over the years. It featured an exclusive roadshow engagement, a *Star Wars* film, a saturation release blockbuster, and finally, a 70mm box-office sensation.

On January 1, the theater opened the Dallas exclusive of the film version of the popular Broadway musical *Evita*. Like the musicals of the 1960s, the release of *Evita* was staggered so that excitement and anticipation could build up over a period of time. The film debuted in New York and Los Angeles on Christmas Day, then had a ten-day, exclusive run

at twenty-two venues across the country.<sup>230</sup> Although the twenty-two roadshow venues did not go as far as to have programs and only two showtimes per day (a matinee and an evening performance), the tickets were made available through a special Ticketmaster telephone line so they could be purchased like a touring Broadway show.<sup>231</sup>



Figure 27 - Promotional Poster for *Evita* at NorthPark

<sup>230</sup> Boxofficemojo.com, “Evita (1996) – Daily Box Office Results – Box Office Mojo,” last modified 2015, accessed March 3, 2015, <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=daily&id=evita.htm>.

<sup>231</sup> “Evita: NorthPark Cinema I & II Exclusive Poster,” poster, 2015, in author’s possession.

The next film of note to be exhibited was the special edition re-release of *Star Wars* on January 31, 1997. It was a nostalgic success for staff and customers alike, but it was clear that the business had changed.<sup>232</sup> When NorthPark exhibited *Star Wars* in 1977, they had the Dallas exclusive and only ran it in a single auditorium. That opening week, *Star Wars* grossed \$100,058 while the film in the other auditorium, *Cross of Iron*, grossed \$6,431. Applying the average per ticket price of \$2.23 that was used earlier in this thesis, that comes out to 44,869 patrons for *Star Wars* and 2,883 for *Cross of Iron* for the week beginning on May 27.<sup>233</sup>

Unfortunately, the box office records for the re-release are unavailable, but a comparison can be made with a similar film. In May of 1997, exactly twenty years after *Star Wars* first opened, NorthPark opened the new Steven Spielberg movie *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* on both screens. This film was released as a saturation booking, with 3,241 theaters playing the film<sup>234</sup> as opposed to the forty-three screens showing *Star Wars* on its opening weekend.<sup>235</sup> For *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, the combined total for both auditoriums was \$57,806, which represented 12,130 patrons. This represented a 75% decline in patrons from the same weekend twenty years before. Typically that kind of customer base loss would be proof that a theater had lost its relevancy, but most of the decline was due to the oversaturation of print allocations and not necessarily to the location losing its top-level status. According to boxofficemojo.com, the film grossed a total of \$104 million across 3,241 locations during its opening weekend. This divides out to a per location average of \$31,960.<sup>236</sup> The Cinemas at NorthPark had almost double the average. The box

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<sup>232</sup> Ron Beardmore, interview by author, Dallas, Texas, October 20, 2004.

<sup>233</sup> "General Cinema Theaters Weekly Summary 11/76 to 11/82," binder of box office reports in author's possession.

<sup>234</sup> Boxofficemojo.com, "The Lost World: Jurassic Park (1997) – Weekly Box Office Results – Box Office Mojo," last modified 2015, accessed February 28, 2015, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=weekly&id=jurassicpark2.htm>.

<sup>235</sup> Michael Coate, "May 25, 1977: A Day Long Remembered," *From Script to DVD*, last modified 2015, accessed March 3, 2015, [http://www.fromscripttodvd.com/star\\_wars\\_a\\_day\\_long\\_remembered.htm](http://www.fromscripttodvd.com/star_wars_a_day_long_remembered.htm).

<sup>236</sup> "The Lost World: Jurassic Park," Box Office Mojo, accessed Feb, 28, 2015, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=weekly&id=jurassicpark2.htm>.

office revenues had been split over a much larger group of theaters, but NorthPark was still able to stay ahead of the national average.



Figure 28 - Newspaper Advertisement for *Titanic* in 70mm

The last film of note for 1997 opened in Cinema 1 and occupied that auditorium for most of the spring. This was a 70mm exclusive of James Cameron's *Titanic*. The NorthPark 1 & 2 was one of only twelve venues in the entire United States, and the only one in the southern half of the country, to play the film in this format. This engagement of *Titanic* would be the last new movie released in Dallas on 70mm film until *Interstellar* opened in November of 2014.<sup>237</sup> When NorthPark closed in October of 1998, many of the articles pointed to the run of *Titanic* as the high point of a theater with many things to brag about. One customer,

<sup>237</sup> Chris Vognar, "The Big Screen: *Interstellar* and the Celluloid Revival," *Dallas Morning News Online*, November 6, 2014, sec. Pop Culture, accessed March 4, 2015, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.uta.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/15172F2CCD3220C8?p=AWNB>.

Daniel Dunnan, went as far as to say, "If you saw *Titanic* here, you saw a better movie than if you saw it anywhere else."<sup>238</sup>

### *The Last Picture Shows*

The second chapter of this thesis described how the Cinemas at NorthPark were created by a combining of forces within the city of Dallas, NorthPark Center, the movie exhibition industry, and specifically the General Cinema Corporation working to create a footprint in the Texas market. These exact same forces would combine to close the theater three decades later. The first part of this chapter discussed how The Grand and other megaplexes were beginning to pull customers away from the older, established theaters to the new entertainment destinations with more screens and amenities. These changing customer preferences and the economic forces that went with them were causing a decline in overall attendance at the Cinemas at NorthPark.

The movie exhibition industry as a whole had changed and NorthPark was unable to maintain relevancy in the new paradigm. The industry changes then led to Nasher wanting to build a newer, bigger theater as part of a larger mall expansion that he was planning. This created two problems for the Cinemas at NorthPark. First, the physical space that the theater building was on was in the direct path of this expansion. The second issue was that although NorthPark Center offered to find a new place for General Cinema to build a new theater, their plans included a "modern" megaplex theater, which was a style that GCC had not fully adopted in their business model.

Finally, the General Cinema Corporation, which had always maintained a program of moderate change and diversification, conceded that they were not going to be able to keep up with the megaplex building boom. In 1998, the once great exhibition giant had already

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<sup>238</sup> "That's a Wrap: NorthPark Cinema's Last Day Stirs Nostalgia," *Dallas Morning News*, October 23, 1998, sec. News, p. 37A.



closed several of their locations in the Dallas area that year, including cinemas at Irving Mall, Collin Creek, Prestonwood Town Center, and the NorthPark 3 & 4. These were done as part of a major purging they were performing throughout their Texas locations so they could focus more on other markets.<sup>239</sup> The closing of the NorthPark 1 & 2 had always been rumored to be a part of this wave of closings, but remained open through to October. GCC did leave several suburban theaters in operation for about another year, and even made an attempt at a modern megaplex-style location to replace the closed theater at Irving Mall.<sup>240</sup>

The Cinemas at NorthPark had several different closing performances depending on the person's relationship to the theater. On Thursday, October 22, the last two films shown to paying audiences were the highly forgettable pairing of *Simon Birch* and *A Night at the Roxbury*.<sup>241</sup> The following morning, Universal rented out Cinema 1 for a press screening of their new Brad Pitt film, *Meet Joe Black*. As far as most people are concerned, those were the last official films on NorthPark's calendar.

But on the night of Friday, October 23, about one hundred people gathered together at the theater to watch a double feature of *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The informal gathering featured stories and goodbyes from the different eras of the theater's thirty-three year history. There were managers, projectionists, concessionists, box office attendants, film buyers, and a few lucky "friends of the theater" that heard about it through word of mouth. It was not a somber occasion, but a celebration of movies and the place that they are shown. The last ever image on the massive Cinema 1 screen was of the magical "ark of the covenant" being loaded into a box and warehoused with thousands of other identical boxes—something unique and special becoming lost. This film was not chosen to make some grandiose pronouncement on the future of the movie exhibition

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<sup>239</sup> Maria Halkias, "NorthPark, AMC Plan 18-Screen Theater, Mall also will add outdoor plaza, restaurants," *Dallas Morning News*, June 8, 2000, sec. News, p. 1A.

<sup>240</sup> Cinematreasures.org, "Irving Mall 14 In Irving, TX – Cinema Treasures," last modified 2015, accessed March 3, 2015, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/19675>.

<sup>241</sup> "That's a Wrap: NorthPark Cinema's Last Day Stirs Nostalgia," *Dallas Morning News*, October 23, 1998, sec. News, p. 37A.

industry, but because the projectionists liked the film and wanted to see it there one last time. Though not intended, this image did make a statement.<sup>242</sup>

After the movie, the audience left the theater in small groups, with attendees walking past the reader board marquee on their way to the parking lot. The sign that had announced the names of the movies playing inside with white plastic letters now simply read, “Thanks for the memories. 33 years. Goodbye.”<sup>243</sup>



Figure 29 - Frame from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*

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<sup>242</sup> Ron Beardmore, interview by author, Dallas, Texas, October 20, 2004.

<sup>243</sup> Joe Stumpo, “Darth Stumpo Tells It Like It Is: Remembering the General Cinema NorthPark I & II Movie Theater (1965-1998),” *Darthstumpo.com*, last modified 1999, accessed March 3, 2015, <http://www.darthstumpo.com/2011/04/in-memory-of-general-cinema-northpark-i.html>.

*Movies Exhibited at NorthPark 1995–1998*

*1995*

- |                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1. Murder in the First            | 12. Apollo 13   |
| 2. Miami Rhapsody                 | 13. Waterworld  |
| 3. The Hunted                     | 14. To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything!<br>Julie Newmar |
| 4. Man of the House               | 15. Unstrung Heroes                                     |
| 5. Losing Isaiah                  | 16. How to Make an American Quilt                       |
| 6. Jefferson in Paris             | 17. The Scarlet Letter                                  |
| 7. Doctor Zhivago                 | 18. Gold Diggers  |
| 8. The Cure                       | 19. Casino  |
| 9. Crimson Tide                   | 20. Nixon   |
| 10. Casper                        | 21. Grumpier Old Men                                    |
| 11. The Bridges of Madison County |   |

*1996*

- |                              |                         |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. 12 Monkeys                | 15. Joe's Apartment     |
| 2. White Squall              | 16. Jack                |
| 3. Beautiful Girls           | 17. She's the One       |
| 4. Up Close and Personal     | 18. Bulletproof         |
| 5. Diabolique                | 19. Giant               |
| 6. Sgt. Bilko                | 20. Emma                |
| 7. A Family Thing            | 21. Sleepers            |
| 8. James and the Giant Peach | 22. Michael Collins     |
| 9. The Quest                 | 23. Ransom              |
| 10. Twister                  | 24. Vertigo             |
| 11. Flipper                  | 25. Daylight            |
| 12. Dragonheart              | 26. The Crucible        |
| 13. Hunchback                | 27. My Fellow Americans |
| 14. The Nutty Professor      |                         |

1997

1. Evita
2. Mother
3. Star Wars (RR)
4. Rosewood
5. Jungle 2 Jungle
6. The Godfather
7. Inventing the Abbotts
8. Murder at 1600
9. Romy and Michelle's High School Reunion
10. Lost World
11. Hercules
12. Out to Sea
13. Contact

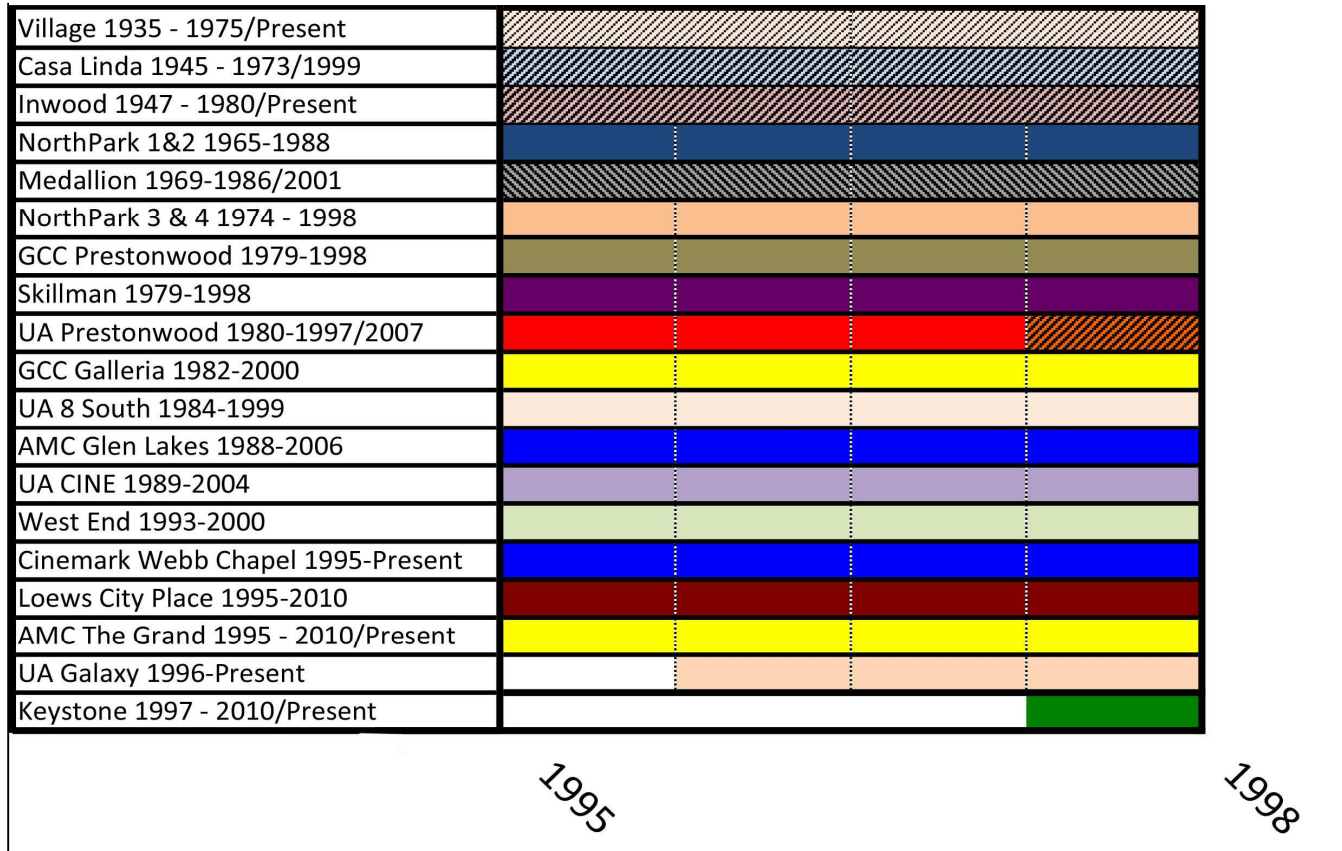
14. Nothing to Lose
15. Event Horizon
16. Mimic
17. Kull the Conqueror
18. L.A. Confidential
19. A Thousand Acres
20. The Edge
21. A Life Less Ordinary
22. Critical Care
23. Anastasia
24. Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil
25. Titanic (70mm)
26. Good Will Hunting

1998

1. Blues Brothers 2000
2. Good Will Hunting
3. Krippendorf's Tribe
4. U.S. Marshalls
5. Mercury Rising
6. The Object of My Affection
7. The Horse Whisperer

8. Bulworth
9. A Perfect Murder
10. Armageddon
11. There's Something About Mary
12. Dead Man on Campus
13. Simon Birch
14. A Night at the Roxbury

Table 14 - Movie Theaters in Operation 1995–1998



## Chapter 7

### Epilogue and Conclusion

We are bound together by our fascination and passion for cinema. This has been our past and our present and it is also our future.

—Cheryl Boone Isaacs<sup>244</sup>

The closing and ultimate demolition of the NorthPark 1 & 2 was only the beginning of a downward trend for its parent company, the General Cinema Corporation, and many other exhibition companies like it as they were either sold off or went bankrupt during the fifth generation of movie exhibition. In the two years following the closing of the Cinemas at NorthPark, thirteen significant theater chains that could not remain competitive in the megaplex building boom filed for bankruptcy.<sup>245</sup> Dallas-based Silver Cinemas was the first to



Figure 30 - Demolition of Cinema II

file for Chapter 11 in May of 2000 and were almost immediately followed by the once great chains of United Artists, Carmike, Mann Theatres, Edwards Cinema, Loews Cineplex

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<sup>244</sup> Neil Meron and Craig Zadan, prods., *The 87th Annual Academy Awards* (Los Angeles: ABC Television), February 22, 2015.

<sup>245</sup> Robert Marich, *Marketing to Moviegoers: A Handbook of Strategies and Tactics* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 229.

Entertainment, and Regal Cinemas.<sup>246</sup> In 2001, after almost forty years of being direct and fierce competition, AMC purchased General Cinema out of bankruptcy for the paltry sum of \$195 million dollars, or the amount that AMC would have paid to build about eight new megaplex locations.<sup>247</sup>

In pure economic terms the numbers were staggering. During this period, the top five exhibition chains at the time—AMC, Carmike Cinemas, Cinemark USA, Loews Cineplex, and Regal Entertainment—combined to spend over \$4 billion in capital to build these new megaplex theaters.<sup>248</sup> Although many older theaters were closing while the new ones were opening, the screen count still grew at a rate of 7.5% per year while the attendance only expanded by 2.4% annually.<sup>249</sup> In the early years of the megaplex, many of the smaller operators attempted to survive with older locations by offering lower pricing on tickets and concessions hoping to draw in a focused audience made up of families, seniors, and customers that wanted the convenience of close proximity. Most of these were gone by 2000.<sup>250</sup>

The megaplex trend did have its share of early skeptics that recognized the inherent flaws in the model. In 1996, executive vice president of the National Amusements theater chain, Shari Redstone,<sup>251</sup> voiced her concern about the new theaters. She warned exhibitors, “For the sake of the industry, I hope circuits really think about where and what they build, and the need in any given market for additional screens. In the end, the whole industry must work together for exhibition to reach its peak and be a success.”<sup>252</sup> Ultimately,

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<sup>246</sup> Jennifer Mann, “Theater Chain Files Bankruptcy Papers – General Cinema Joins Growing List Asking For Help,” *The Kansas City Star*, October 12, 2000, p. C1.

<sup>247</sup> “AMC to Buy Operator of General Cinema,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 2001, <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/dec/08/business/fi-12776>, accessed March 12, 2015.

<sup>248</sup> This total does not include money spent in closing older theaters and lease penalties.

<sup>249</sup> Mariach, 229.

<sup>250</sup> Paul Owers, “Megaplexes Pushing Out Smaller Theaters,” *The Palm Beach Post*, August, 20, 2000, p. 1F, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://inforweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/OEAF411E70B445AD?p=AWNB>.

<sup>251</sup> Shari Redstone is Sumner Redstone’s daughter. Sumner Redstone is the majority share owner for both the CBS group of broadcast networks as well as Paramount Pictures.

<sup>252</sup> Kevin Lally, “A Redstone Milestone: National Amusements Celebrates 60 Years of Achievement and Innovation,” *Film Journal International*, November 1996, 190.

competition and hubris led to unprecedented over-screening both locally and nationally. One Houston-area journalist said it best when he wrote that from the perspective of the theater chains, "It's always the *other guy* that's overbuilding. *Your* brand new megaplex, on the other hand, is an example of strategically finding a little noticed gap in the market."<sup>253</sup> In theory, this was no different than the other building booms that had come before and were discussed in the previous chapters except that the "little noticed gap in the market" had become smaller than ever before. By 2002, movie exhibition had experienced a complete, industry-wide destabilization, and by the end of the year most all of the third and fourth generation theaters were gone, as were the companies that built them.<sup>254</sup> Even the theater that started it all, The AMC Grand, would only have a lifespan of fifteen years before it was closed. It would reopen a year later with a new owner after an extensive overhaul that removed ten of the screens.<sup>255</sup>

The most important outcome from all of the restructuring and consolidation is that it allowed the distributors who held stakes in these exhibition companies to quietly extricate themselves from the volatile climate in the new era. The entire fourth generation of cinemas were built because of the return to vertical integration, but the large amount of capital that was spent on these new locations was just too much for them to keep investing. As of today, of the 41,518 screens in the United States and Canada, only 423 of these are affiliated with a movie distributor. National Amusements, who operates these 423 screens, owns both CBS and Paramount Pictures.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> David Welling, *Cinema Houston* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 292.

<sup>254</sup> Charles R. Acland, "Opening Everywhere: Multiplexes and the Speed of Cinema Culture," in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 372.

<sup>255</sup> Manuel Mendoza, "New Amstar Cinemas 14 Opens in Old AMC Grand 24 Space," *Dallas Morning News Online*, October 11, 2011, accessed, March 15, 2015, <http://www.dallasnews.com/entertainment/movies/headlines/20111011-new-amstar-cinemas-14-opens-in-old-amc-grand-24-space.ece>.

<sup>256</sup> Sapana Maheshwari, "National Amusements Plans to Replace Credit Line," *Bloomberg Business Online*, November 23, 2010, accessed, March 19, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2010-11-23/national-amusements-plans-notes-to-replace-credit-line-update1>.



Ownership transfers and closings were not the only changes introduced in the fifth generation of movie exhibition. Changes in theater construction, specifically in the auditorium, were the defining characteristics of this generation. These changes were not met with universal praise, as some might believe. The customers might have preferred the new amenities and greater options, but some began to worry about how these new cinema designs were affecting audiences and how they viewed movies. When commenting on new theaters in 1997, Philip Wuntch pointed out that some sound experts argued that stadium seating was not ideal for movie theaters and even pointed out that at the time of the writing, the Cinemas at NorthPark still had a better and more powerful sound system than the buildings that were being built at the time.<sup>257</sup>

In addition to inferior sound,<sup>258</sup> stadium seating also changed how people watched movies in the theater. Roger Ebert, longtime advocate for the old movie palaces, argued that there are different psychological reactions to a film that are dependent on whether the viewer is looking up at the screen as opposed to being level with it or even looking down to it. He stated that the solution to this problem is not to raise the seats, but raise the screen and gently rake the floor.<sup>259</sup> He went on to say that this was the design of the classic movie palaces, but he was only half right because he ignored the balcony seats in his analysis. The Cinemas at NorthPark were designed with the screens so high off the floor that it was nearly impossible to have another customer obstruct a view.

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<sup>257</sup> Philip Wuntch, "Marquee Attractions – Farewell to the Meager-plex: New Movie Houses Entertain in Grand Style," *Dallas Morning News*, April 5, 1997, sec. Today, p. 5C.

<sup>258</sup> The inferior sound in stadium seating auditoriums is often attributed to the fact that cinema speakers are designed for a lateral dispersal and do not provide adequate coverage from the lower rows to the top rows. New speaker designs compensate for this and use an "array" design similar to those used at stadiums and concerts.

<sup>259</sup> Roger Ebert, "Movie Answer Man (11/05/2000) | Movie Answer Man | Roger Ebert," *Rogerebert.com*, last modified 2000, accessed March 19, 2015, <http://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/movie-answer-man-11052000>.

### *The New NorthPark and the Future of Dallas Cinema*

This thesis has demonstrated that the generations of movie exhibition are cyclical and that those cycles are clearly defined by the types of buildings that are built to show the films. The first generation of theaters—the Nickelodeons and other makeshift viewing spaces—were not well adorned and did not have any customer comforts or amenities. These early spaces predated both interior air conditioning and concessions. They were not comfortable places, but people patronized them because they were the only place to see movies. The second generation was highlighted by the urban palace theaters. They were magnificent buildings that were destination attractions in their own right with movies serving as only part of the entertainment. Feature films were accompanied by live music, cartoon shorts, and newsreels; even live productions were often scheduled when not showing movies. The third generation featured the practical, utilitarian sites like the NorthPark I & II. They were stripped of unnecessary decorative elements and focused on selling the movie over the theater. The fourth and fifth generations were similar to each other in that they both represented a return to selling the theater and the customer experience. Theaters evolved with more screens and greater focus on giving the customer a better experience as they competed with viewing films in the home during this time.

The new theaters that are being built today are in a unique position as they attempt to merge modern technology with a feeling and aesthetic of the past.<sup>260</sup> When AMC opened a new fifteen-screen theater at NorthPark Center in 2006 to replace the NorthPark 1 & 2, they designed the lobby with images from earlier times in movie history.<sup>261</sup> These design elements included a mural of celebrity graphics, director's series photographs on the walls,

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<sup>260</sup>Mark Jancovich, Lucy Faire, and Sarah Stubbings, *The Place of the Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption* (London: British Film Institute Press, 2003), 203.

<sup>261</sup>The included picture shows quotes from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *Shrek*. The mural shows *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

and a terrazzo floor inlaid with movie quotes distributed throughout the lobby.<sup>262</sup> Although they do remind the customers of films that predate the cinema they are in, these elements are not included as part of the architecture. These adornments were designed in a way that they can be changed, updated, or ultimately removed without requiring an expensive remodel.



Figure 31 - AMC NorthPark Lobby

The opening epigraph for this thesis posed French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's idea that to understand the modern American city, you had to start with the movie screen and work out towards the city as a whole.<sup>263</sup> Though this seems a bit hyperbolic, there is evidence within the city of Dallas to support this position. Given that movie theaters provide a rare intersection of commerce and popular art, the history of these cinemas provides

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<sup>262</sup> "American Multi-Cinema Now Showing: AMC Theatres Opens AMC NorthPark 15," last modified 2015, accessed March 12, 2015, [http://files.shareholder.com/downloads/AEN/0x0x87058/b841c5c0-89d0-4ff2-a724-5b5b541b79e5/PRIVATE\\_News\\_2006\\_5\\_1\\_General.pdf](http://files.shareholder.com/downloads/AEN/0x0x87058/b841c5c0-89d0-4ff2-a724-5b5b541b79e5/PRIVATE_News_2006_5_1_General.pdf).

<sup>263</sup> Baudrillard, 56.

researchers of many disciplines with information regarding localized consumer and leisure habits, transportation issues, real estate trends, and the dispersion of people.

But these particular screens have something to contribute to a study beyond the city limits of Dallas. Over the last hundred years, this has been a city at the forefront of shaping how movies are watched. Not only has it provided great venues for study, but it was also the location of the first Blockbuster Video. This store, which fostered the adoption of VHS in homes across the world, was located just a mile and half from NorthPark at the intersection of Northwest Highway and Skillman Avenue.<sup>264</sup>

Despite playing such an important role in how movies have been exhibited and seen, the city of Dallas has only thirteen active movie theater locations with a total of 114 screens today. Three of them specialize in art films (Texas Theatre, The Magnolia, and Angelika Film Center Dallas) and two of them are exclusively dinner and a movie concept locations (the Studio Movie Grills at Royal and Northwest Highway). This leaves only eight traditional, first-run movie theaters in the entire city and only *one* screen south of I-30. Located in Oak Cliff, the Texas primarily features live shows, repertory and art films, leaving customers that are looking for the big Hollywood blockbusters completely unserved throughout the southern half of the city.

Ironically, the two main factors for exhibitors not wanting to build new theaters in Dallas is the same reason that drove the customers out of downtown theaters in the 1960s: crime and parking. While south Dallas remains disproportionately under-screened today, this was not always the case. In the 1980s, General Cinema operated ten screens in and around Red Bird Mall in two separate buildings (one building was named the “I-IV” and the other was the “V-X,” similar to how NorthPark had the I & II as well as the III & IV). Seeing an under-screened area, or “little noticed gap in the market,” United Artists built one of their

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<sup>264</sup> Beth Pinkser, “Blockbuster’s Dallas Roots at Heart of 10th Anniversary,” *Dallas Morning News*, October 19, 1995, sec. Business, p. 2D.

fourth generation multiplexes just south of I-20 in the same area. Not long after opening, these theaters gained a reputation for being dangerous, as did Red Bird Mall and the area in general, and attendance suffered. The reputation proved to be well earned when the manager of the General Cinema V-X was murdered when she was followed while leaving the theater after her shift.<sup>265</sup>

Parking is also a major concern for exhibitors attempting to open a theater in Dallas. The city ordinance that specifically covers indoor movie theaters requires a ratio of 0.27 parking places for every seat in the theater.<sup>266</sup> AMC's The Grand, as an example of a megaplex, had 5,000 seats which required 1,350 parking spots. According to a study at the University of Tennessee, the average parking lot is designed with spaces that are 10' by 18' or 180sf each. In this study, they suggest traffic lanes that are 24' in width on the interior and 12' on the outside (this study did not include any landscaping). With this layout, they were able to fit 144 parking places per acre. The result would be a requirement of 9.3 acres of open space to build sufficient parking to satisfy zoning requirements. The entire footprint of The Grand (including sidewalks and a large outdoor common area) occupied 133,000sf, or a three-acre space, bringing the grand total of space needed to build a new twenty-four-screen megaplex to Dallas to about twelve acres. It is interesting to note that the same zoning statute would require only 320 parking places if this same building held a big box retail store and only 133 if the building housed light manufacturing.<sup>267</sup>

In a manner similar to the way in which theater patrons in the 1960s were abandoning the downtown theaters because they couldn't find a safe place to park, the theaters are abandoning the city because they can't find a safe place to build a parking lot. If, somehow, they were able to find a large enough area of land that was safe, it would also

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<sup>265</sup> Anne Bell, "Man Convicted in Theater Employee's Slaying," *Dallas Morning News*, March 29, 1991, sec. News, p. 25A.

<sup>266</sup> City of Dallas, *Chapter 51A Article XIII: Form Districts* (Dallas, 2015), accessed March 8, 2015, <http://www.dallascityattorney.com/51A/article13.pdf>.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

have to have a surrounding population large enough to serve as a clientele and a lease or purchase arrangement that would prove to be profitable. There are at least two exhibitors that have done exploratory studies of the area and cited the parking issue as the reason they chose not to build within the city of Dallas.<sup>268</sup>

The question then becomes what does all of this mean for the future of watching movies in Dallas. Given that a large area of land that could economically support a standard megaplex does not seem to be available, the push appears to be towards a smaller, boutique experience. AMC has launched a remodeling initiative that is specifically directed at their auditoriums. The conversions center on removing the standard movie theater chair and replacing it with reclining La-Z-Boy-type seats. Following the conversion, the seating capacity is usually about one-third what it was before the seating modification.<sup>269</sup>



Figure 32 - Auditorium #5 Studio Movie Grill Plano

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<sup>268</sup> Adam Peterson of Universal Cinema Supply, interview by author, Las Vegas, Nevada, March 28, 2014.

<sup>269</sup> Erich Schwartzel, "Now at the Movies: Fully Reclining Seats: AMC Spending \$600 Million to Remodel Theaters with Larger Chairs, Fewer Seats," *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, July 6, 2014, <https://login.ezproxy.uta.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1543236669?accountid=7117>.

Another popular trend is in-theater dining. These can be either purpose-built or conversions from an existing multi- or megaplex cinema. Regardless of origin, these also greatly reduce a screening space's possible seating capacity by adding tables, counters, and walkways for food runners and servers. One of these companies, the Alamo Drafthouse, has announced a new location in Dallas to open in late 2015 or early 2016. It will have the distinction of adding eight screens south of I-30, but only barely, as it will be located just south of downtown in the South Lamar area.

In addition to lower seat counts, what the dual trends of recliner seats and dining service have in common is that they are both primarily focused on customer comfort and convenience. These new theaters are bolder, brighter spaces that attempt to overwhelm the moviegoer with the experience of going to that particular cinema and are less focused on the movie on the screen. In fact, these theaters are showing fewer new feature films than ever as they are incorporating broadcasts of live theatre productions, repertory movies, concert videos, and live television programming. This type of offering is what Harry Alan Potamkin referred to in the palace era as a "polyglot program" and a distraction away from a movie theater's primary purpose: showing movies.<sup>270</sup>

The exhibition industry has returned to an age of, using Marcus Loew's words, "selling tickets to theatres, not movies." In addition to the manner in which the theaters advertise themselves, there are two conditions that are common between the second generation palace theaters and the modern theaters that prove the idea of selling tickets to theaters and not the films on screen. The first necessary condition is a small window in which a movie can be viewed in a theater.<sup>271</sup> During the second generation, 60% of the US population was attending at least one movie weekly.<sup>272</sup> Turnover was key as they were

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<sup>270</sup> Potamkin, 550.

<sup>271</sup> Hark, 6.

<sup>272</sup> Michael Pautz, "The Decline in Average Weekly Cinema Attendance: 1930-2000)," *Issues in Political Economy*, 2002, Vol. 11.

attempting to entertain the audience once they were in the building with a product that was essentially disposable and would be replaced with something new the following week. Although movies do typically stay at a theater for longer than a week in the modern era by virtue of having smaller auditoriums to move to, there is always a new slate of two to five films to choose from the following week. This is in contrast to the third generation where runs of a year were possible even through the late 1970s. Although a movie could run at a single location for that amount of time, the multi-tiered run-zone-clearance system allowed a particular film to move through the levels of exhibitors over a long period of time. A version of this existed through the 1990s when dollar theaters would extend the theatrical run of a film to a total of three to six months after its initial release. Once the average video release date dipped below four months after premiering in theaters, these post-first-run theaters no longer had a place in the market. The Medallion 5 closed in December of 2001 and there have not been any of these in Dallas since.



Figure 33 - Movie Theater Box Office with Menu Board Showtime Schedule



The other necessary factor in selling the theater and not the movie is that the customer's primary impetus for going to the movies is either the particular cinema or just wanting to experience the act of going to the cinema without regard to the film showing. In 2014, The Nielsen Group, who has been tracking entertainment consumption since the 1940s, released a study of modern movie-going habits. In it, they found that 23% of people pick a movie after arriving at the theater. This means that almost one quarter of all of the tickets sold in 2013 were purchased by customers who had decided to go to a cinema with the movie choice being a secondary concern.<sup>273</sup> This is the modern version of "selling tickets to theaters" in practice.

### *Conclusion*

The year is 2015. Once again, it is mid-decade and the box office sales are in decline. The year 2014 saw the lowest number of tickets sold since 1994, the year before The Grand started a new type of theater construction and renewed interest in movie going.<sup>274</sup> Both distributors and exhibitors are beginning to realize that the newness of the megaplex has worn off and changes are being made on both sides in an attempt to reverse the trend. Exhibitors are modifying their theaters to make them more comfortable and appealing to audiences.

Distributors, on the other hand, are experimenting with two antithetical approaches. Some of the studios are looking to bypass the theater experience completely and sell directly to customers through a Video On Demand (VOD) model.<sup>275</sup> This practice takes the wide-release model that was introduced with *Jaws* to a larger scale by making the movie available

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<sup>273</sup> Nielsen.com, "#Twothumbsup: Moviegoing at a Theater Near You," last modified 2015, accessed March 13, 2015, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2014/twothumbsup-moviegoing-at-a-theater-near-you.html>.

<sup>274</sup> Pamela McClintock, "Box Office: Five Worrisome Moviegoing Trends in 2014," *The Hollywood Reporter Online*, March 11, 2015, accessed March 13, 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/box-office-five-worrisome-moviegoing-780787>.

<sup>275</sup> Mandalit Del Barco, "Movie Chains Balk at Netflix's Plan for Simultaneous Release," *National Public Radio Online*, March 7, 2015, accessed March 13, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2015/03/07/391458598/movie-chains-balk-at-screening-new-film-while-netflix-debuts-it-online>.

on an infinite number of screens. Other producers and distributors are trying to make going to the movies more of an event by making them *more* exclusive. An early NorthPark practice is even returning this year with Quentin Tarantino's new film *The Hateful Eight* planning a 70mm roadshow release.<sup>276</sup>

The conditions that exist today are the same that have historically forced other drastic shifts in the ways that films are exhibited. The exhibition tier of the movie industry is once again separate from distribution. The trend to have as many as thirty screens under one roof has ended and screen counts within a theater are in decline. The last theater that AMC, inventor of the megaplex, built in the DFW area had only nine screens. The new amenities that the theaters have been installing have caused a rise in average ticket prices. A recent study by PricewaterhouseCoopers found that 53% of those surveyed cited lower prices as a factor that would motivate them to go to the movies more often. Only 8% responded that a "better theater experience" would make them want to go to the movie theater more often than they do now.<sup>277</sup>

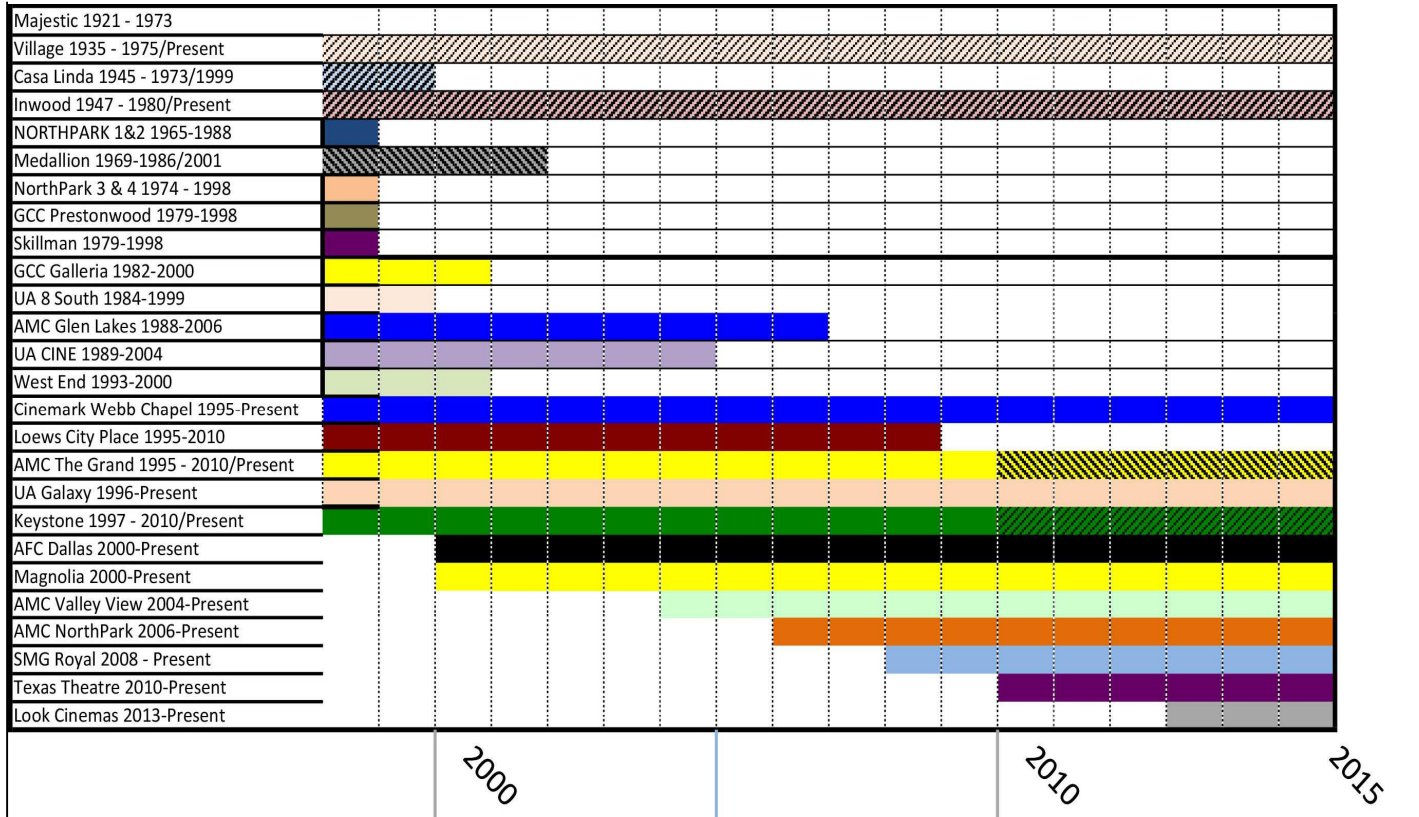
A natural conclusion to draw from this is that a way to save the movie exhibition industry would be to return to an era similar to the third generation of theaters. When the theater chains were in decline they adopted an austere philosophy that was applied to both cinema building and how the operations were run. The Cinemas at NorthPark were the epitome of the third generation theater. It was a simple approach that was successful for thirty-three years without any costly building modifications or operational changes. It is important to know the history of this theater as it could very well serve as an example for the future.

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<sup>276</sup> Mike Flemming, Jr., "Quentin Tarantino on Retirement, Grand 70mm Intl Plans for *The Hateful Eight*," *Deadline Hollywood Online*, November 10, 2014, accessed March 13, 2015, <http://deadline.com/2014/11/quentin-tarantino-retirement-hateful-eight-international-release-1201280583/>.

<sup>277</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers "Consumer Intelligence Series: Summer 2014 Movie Going Declines a Blip on the Radar?" accessed March 13, 2015, [http://www.pwc.com/en\\_US/us/industry/entertainment-media/publications/consumer-intelligence-series/assets/pwc-cis-box-office-trends.pdf](http://www.pwc.com/en_US/us/industry/entertainment-media/publications/consumer-intelligence-series/assets/pwc-cis-box-office-trends.pdf).

Table 15 - Movie Theaters in Operation 1998–2015



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