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Los Angeles Times

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Charles Lee's Glory days

IMPRESARIO H. L. GUMBINER WANTED SOMETHING BETTER, MORE SUMPTUOUS than his Tower Theatre downtown, recalls architect S. Charles Lee, who had designed the Baroque-styled extravagance at Broadway and 89th Street for him in 1927 with an interior modeled after the Paris Opera House.

So the Beaux Arts-trained Lee dipped further back into history and, on a 35-foot-wide lot a block and a half away at 615 S. Broadway, designed the Los Angeles Theatre as if Louis XVI were his client.

After all, Gumbiner had made a fortune with the Tower Theatre, which was the first built in Southern California for the talkies—"The Jazz Singer" premiered there—and the first to be air-conditioned.

WHEN THE LOS ANGELES THEATRE OPENED IN 1931 FOR THE WORLD PREMIER of Charlie Chaplin's "City Lights," the \$1.5-million design by the then 32-year-old architect defined the phrase "movie palace."

It also turned out to be the last such palace built on Broadway, then beginning to feel the effects of the Depression and the competition of Hollywood Boulevard for the title of the "Great White Way of the West."

Gumbiner eventually would go bankrupt, while Lee went on to design other theaters and buildings of note before giving up architecture in the 1950s to become a successful developer. Of the many projects with which he has been involved, Lee considers the Los Angeles Theatre one of his favorites, and on a recent tour there, talked about the design.

Behind the theater's exterior marked by a bright terrazzo sidewalk and an ornate facade of Corinthian columns was a luxurious lobby that Lee says was fashioned after the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, extended to a two-story height and focused on a fountain on the mezzanine level featuring strands of crystal simulating falling water.

"We thought for 35 cents a person should be able to get their art as well as their entertainment," Lee said. "The idea of combining art and entertainment we copied from the church, just as we copied some of the decorations from the French."

LEE WAS PARTICULARLY PROUD OF THE LUXURIOUS DESIGN OF THE BASEMENT, which, when the theater opened, included a ballroom where people waiting for seats or the next show could dance, eat in an adjacent restaurant or even view the film on a small screen that by a prism device reflected the big screen in the auditorium above.

There was also a spacious smoking room and marble-encrusted men's and women's rooms, the latter including 16 private toilet stalls, each faced with a different color marble.

Downstairs was a room decorated as the inside of a circus tent where children could be left in the care of attendants provided by the theater. Upstairs behind the balcony was a soundproof room, where parents could see and hear the film while comforting their crying children.

Other features included a board in the lobby wired to each seat in the theater that showed ushers where there were vacancies. And, of course, there was the auditorium itself, replete with crystal chandeliers, plush and easily accessible seating and ornate decorations.

The theater is still very much in operation, though worse for wear. Gone are the special rooms and furnishings; the carpet designed by Lee is threadbare and patched; the snack bar and arcade games clutter up the lobby; and the men's and women's rooms have lost their glitter and attendants.

But the scale and details of the theater are impressive and evocative, and if not in all its past glory, certainly in part glory.

—Feb. 21, 1987