

Spotlight on Washington Deco:

THE SILVER THEATRE AND SILVER SPRING SHOPPING CENTER

by Richard Striner

*(In 1984 Hans Wirz and I published, via Smithsonian Press, Washington Deco: Art Deco Design in the Nation's Capital. Since then, ADSW has done great things to save Deco buildings in Washington. And thanks to the energetic work of hundreds of ADSW volunteers, we have learned a lot more about Deco buildings that we either missed the first time around or else addressed with only limited background information. In "Spotlight on Washington Deco," a continuing *Trans-Lux* feature, I will share some of this new information.)*

The 1938 Silver Theatre-Silver Spring Shopping Center complex was — and is — a landmark in early twentieth-century commercial architecture. It profoundly affected the development of suburban Silver Spring and it helped to shape the overall suburbanization of the Nation's Capital region. Moreover, it stands as one of the most ambitious early examples of a trend in commercial architecture that would change the way in which Americans shop from coast to coast.

As architectural historian Richard Longstreth explained in his article "The Neighborhood Shopping Center in Washington, D.C., 1930-1941" (*Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, March 1992), Washington served as an important new proving ground for experiments in commercial architecture during the Great Depression. The reason was simple: because of its growing New Deal workforce, Washington was one of the few large cities in America that was gaining (rather than losing) in population.

In 1930, two potent ideas for commercial design were combined for the very first time: (1) a recessed parking lot permitting cars to just

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"drive right in" to a shopping center and (2) a planned and coordinated mixture of commercial tenants in a shopping center. Each of these ideas had been previously developed on its own. But they had never been combined until the construction of the "Park-and-Shop" on Connecticut Avenue in Washington's Cleveland Park in 1930.

The Park-and-Shop was a spectacular success, and it inspired the construction of a number of similar neighborhood shopping centers throughout the Washington region. Of these, the 1938 Silver Spring Shopping Center was the largest and most fully realized example in the years before World War II.

In 1936, realtors C.H. Hillegeist, Albert Small, and S.E. Godden did a market survey of Silver Spring as the site for a "Park-and-Shop" center. They took an option on land at the corner of Georgia Avenue and Colesville Road; then they went about recruiting a developer. In June, 1937, the realtors announced that the site would be developed by William Alexander Julian, a wealthy manufacturer who was a close friend of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Julian was serving at the time as Treasurer of the United States.

Julian recruited another close friend to design the center: architect John Eberson of New York, the world-renowned "Dean of American Theatre Architects." The new shopping center would be anchored by an Eberson cinema, leased to the Warner Brothers studio. Many Hollywood studios controlled chains of theatres at the time.

Eberson's commission was announced in November, 1937 and construction of the theatre-shopping center complex began in March, 1938. It was finished in September and formally dedicated on October 27. *The Washington Post* ran a special section to cover the event, which 6,000 people attended. Baseball legend Walter Johnson stopped by and remarked that the scene "reminds me of Broadway."

The Silver Theatre was featured in a number of trade periodicals and touted as one of Eberson's best creations of the 1930s. The "Better Theatres" supplement of *Motion Picture Herald* ran a feature on the Silver in November, 1938. It was covered in the 1939 *Film Daily Year Book of Motion Pictures*. As late as the 1948-49 edition

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of the trade journal *Theatre Catalog*, the Silver was renowned as a sterling Eberson creation.

The *Washington Post* took cognizance of the theatre-shopping center's role in the suburbanization of the Nation's Capital. "Designed to Serve Needs of 50,000," ran a column title on the front page of the *Post's* special section of October 27, 1938; "Planned for Future in Line of D.C. Growth, Extends Urbanization," ran another column headline.

The coverage proved prophetic. The construction of the theatre-shopping center complex triggered a building boom in downtown Silver Spring that led business observers to declare by the early 1950s that the suburb was the "second great city of Maryland."

But Silver Spring began to fall behind as suburban growth created other and newer centers farther out. Moreover, as the shopping center yielded to the regional mall, old pioneering ventures in motor-age commercial architecture like the Silver Spring Shopping Center were increasingly called "obsolete" — notwithstanding their potential for enlightened reuse and their great historic significance.

The battle to preserve the Silver Theatre and Silver Spring Shopping Center complex was launched by the Art Deco Society of Washington in 1984. After decades of controversy came victory. The Silver Theatre re-opened in April, 2003. The Silver Spring Shopping Center will come back to life in 2004, precisely twenty years after preservation action commenced.