WHEN MOVIE PALACES REIGNED

The birth of the massive film theater — most now sadly demolished — spawned a New York building boom and captured a nation’s obsession with larger-than-life glamour. By Ross Melnick

CENTURY AGO THIS MONTH, Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel converted the Strand Theatre at 47th Street and Broadway from a proposed musical venue into a movie theater, a move that eventually would transform the area around Times Square into the nation’s most celebrated moviegoing mecca for millions and usher in a heyday of grand movie palace construction.

Within six years, Rothafel opened the Radio and Rivoli theaters and took over the 5,300-seat Capitol Theatre (all were located on Broadway between 42nd and 50th streets). Later, the impresario’s national celebrity helped finance the 3,200-seat Roxy (at 7th Street and 9th Avenue) in 1917. Built at a staggering $12 million. A 110-piece orchestra was one attraction, along with precision dancers, the Roxettes (later known as the Rockettes), who went with him to Rockefeller Center for the opening of Radio City Music Hall and the B&O Roxy Theatre in 1932, which was backed by B&O. The palaces, Rothafel once said, let the moviestars “release his imagination — where light and music and color paint the pictures of a delightful world.”

Cameras captured gala premieres, and scenes of crowds and gown-clad starlets were splashed across newspapers. Cinemas named Strand, Capitol or Roxy became ubiquitous around the country as exhibitors hoped to bring a little Times Square excitement to their towns.

By the late 1930s, though, declining attendance, suburban migration and television began to impact the enormously expensive theaters. Large, expensive theaters currently form the area around Times Square — most now replaced by an unremarkable landscape. Michigan Avenue in Chicago, the home of the Mile High building, stands as a fascinating relic of the economic decline of the 1970s and 1980s could not escape a real estate boom as the past quarter-century. Of the area’s palaces, only Radio City remains.

Midtown’s 1,321-seat Ziegfeld theater, built in 1919 near the site of a much grander previous Ziegfeld, now reigns as the film star’s top spot for big premieres.

Moviegoing still is big in Manhattan. It’s the theaters that got small.

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