

PROJECT

Picturehouse Central



Arthouse cinema chain, Picturehouse, has a new flagship venue in the heart of London's West End. The site has had its ups and downs, but after a complete transformation led by Panter Hudspith Architects, the place is totally fresh and buzzing, *Herbert Wright* finds. And not least, a sumptuous Arts and Crafts frieze has been restored as well



Just a block from Piccadilly Circus is a corner that was once the swankiest in London's West End, then later the most dilapidated. Now, it opens into the new flagship complex of **Picturehouse Cinemas**, and the glamour is back.

The intersection of Shaftesbury Avenue and Great Windmill Street hosted a music hall until **J Lyons & Co** took it over in 1895 and engaged architects **WJ Ancell** and **J Hatchard Smith** to design the **Trocadero Restaurant**, which opened a year later. This was not one of the soon-to-be ubiquitous Lyons Corner House tea shops, but a ritzy flagship operation where customers could pre-order by telephone. It was an instant hit, and expanded, getting a new red-brick facade in 1902. From 1916 it offered concerts for diners in the Grill Room. A remodelling in 1930 by **FJ Wills** and **Oliver Bernard** included a 20m-long, art-deco wall that disappeared into the floor, making two rooms into a single dance floor. But business faded after the Second World War and it closed in 1965.

Mecca ran a dance hall there, and later added a casino and a bowling alley. The decline wasn't helped in the Sixties by Great Windmill Street being made one-way, rendering the colonnade along it a no-man's land of traffic fumes. In 1984, the whole interior block to Coventry Street was gutted and a bulky, post-modernist volume disguised with slightly fairytale facades by **Fitzroy Robinson** was squeezed behind the site, over a semi-subterranean complex of tourist tack and amusements. It became

positively cyberpunk with **Segaworld's** arrival in 1996.

Picturehouse Cinemas has taken over the seven screens of **Cineworld** from this period, but the 4,500 sq m revamp by **Panter Hudspith Architects** covers a lot more, spread through five buildings. Grade II-listed facades are now decluttered and restored, the colonnade is retiled and relit and a crisply black-and-white, illuminated signage marquee now cantilevers into Shaftesbury Avenue. Inside, everything has been stripped back, suspended ceilings taken out, and riveted structural steelwork exposed. In the bars and circulation areas, interior design practice **Martin Brudnizki Design Studio** has gone for a fashionably eclectic look, an industrial chic of exposed service pipes in ceilings and red-painted steelwork, contrasting with comfortable furnishings and diverse decors.

The 'customer journey' begins with the deep box of the cafe/bar just inside the entrance. The space feels refreshing, its long service counter facing walls that **Patrick Vale** has illustrated with a fun frieze about cinema history. A great straight staircase cuts into a double-height space, accessing the first floor. Here, the jazzy ticketing zone faces a roomy bar with seats in softly coloured fabrics and views over Shaftesbury Avenue. The mood is cosy yet has that frisson of downtown thrill. Heading to the higher floors, there's a very different treat. Back

in 1896, painter **Gerald Moira** made a 27m-long, bas-relief frieze for the entrance, choosing subjects from **Tennyson's Idylls of King Arthur**. Moira's radiant **Lord Leighton**-esque panels are now restored and spotlighted above the escalators that lead up to the cinemas — they're worth going up and down a few times just to marvel at.

A double-height Members Bar on levels 2 and 3, where Brudnizki has gone for controlled kitsch in the decor, is actually positioned over the southern Coventry Street corner, behind a **Treadwell & Martin**-designed 1894 facade; Scott's Restaurant, which competed with Lyons for Edwardian trade, was below. In corner bays, seating floats above Piccadilly Circus, while windows have been punched through the Mansard roof facing Haymarket. A terrace bar 20m above street level perches on the roof.

Total capacity in the seven screens has gone down from 1,400 to 1,040, but each seat is way comfier. The 344-capacity Screen 1 has been resteped, and has no less than 46 speakers for immersive sound (normally you'd expect 10). Brudnizki designed its 15m-wide screen curtain, which has an echo of the colours and grid of **Misha Black's** 1978 District Line seating fabric, but with slanted elements and on a bigger scale.

Panter Hudspith knows how to breath new life into old cinema. In 1998, just up Shaftesbury Avenue, it turned the struggling **Curzon Soho** into one of the hippest hang-outs in town. But it's the eclectic, electric Picturehouse Central that has the new wow.

1 - New lounge and bar
2 - The straight staircase cuts through the double height
3 - Gerald Moira's 27m-long bas-relief frieze, now restored