

# FABULOUS FIFTEEN



YELMO'S CINE IDEAL

## Saluting Exceptional European Cinemas

By Andreas Fuchs

As the industry gathers to celebrate the 15th Anniversary Edition of Cinema Expo International, we also want to take the opportunity to highlight some of the great movie theatres the region has to offer. Coming up with a listing of 15 Exceptional European Cinemas, this author not only had his work cut out, but, in the process, certainly risks having his head chopped off. For every one that was included, there are many others that would have equally qualified. The following account is not a "Top 10" kind of hit parade—



THE SKANDIA IN STOCKHOLM

we'll leave that to the *Grand Prix d'Eurovision de la Chanson*—but a rather subjective selection of superb theatres that are unique in one way or another. Be it in terms of business, history, style, services or location, all of them are exceptional and stand the test of time, 15 years or otherwise.

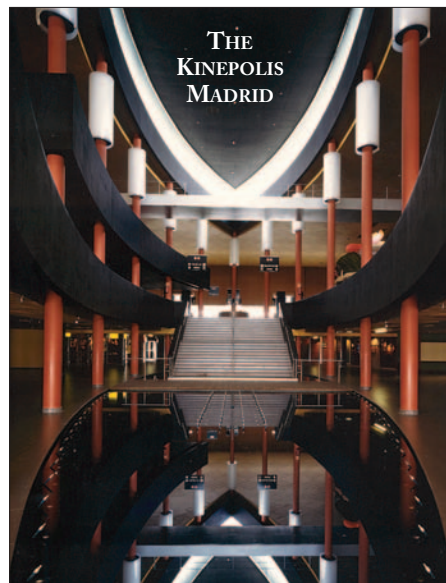
Speaking of hits, with this year's Eurovision winners coming from Finland, Helsinki makes a timely place to start looking for a unique cinema. As the name **Tennispalatsi** suggests, Finnkino's February 1999 multiplex ([www.finnkino.fi](http://www.finnkino.fi)) opened in a former tennis venue that was built on top of a car dealership and repair shop for the canceled 1940 Summer Olympics. During the 1952 Olympiad, basketball was played there. Today, in addition to



FINNKINO'S TENNISPALATSI, HELSINKI

its 3,000 seats and 14 screens, the Tennispalatsi houses the Helsinki City Art Museum, the Museum of Cultures and several restaurants, cafés and small shops. At 21 by nine meters (70 by 30 feet), the biggest screen in Northern Europe is also located in the largest cinema complex of the region, welcoming some 1.6 million moviegoers each year.

In October 1921, Polish tailor Abraham Tuschinski opened the most beautiful theatre in The Netherlands—and to this day, it's one of the greatest ever. He hired several artists to design different sections of the Amsterdam theatre. The resulting mix of Jugendstil, Art Deco and Amsterdamse School was painstakingly restored by Pathé and brought to marvellous new life in time for the 80th birthday of **Theater Tuschinski** ([www.pathe.nl](http://www.pathe.nl)). The mezzanine loges now have luxurious love seats



THE KINOPOLIS MADRID

and the two balconies feature VIP and reception areas for full catering and beverage service, with a variety of buffet dinners offered with the movie.

An additional five screens, ranging from 105 to 191 seats, are located in an adjacent building, allowing for moveovers from the 789 red velvet-seated *grote zaal*. "The theatre now has the original decorations and the same charm as when it opened," says Pathé's managing director Lauge Nielsen, "but adapted to present-day norms. It is a logical venue for premieres but also for fashion shows, concerts and even weddings." Some 600,000 people come to enjoy films there each year, including classic *Nostalgie Vorstellingen* with the Nederlandse Filmmuseum, not to mention thou-



THE KINOPOLIS BRUSSELS

sands more that take a special guided tour of the cinema.

In not-so-far-away Paris, France, **le Grand REX** also has a daily touring attraction, appropriately named *les Étoiles du REX* in reference to the starry ceiling of its December 1932 atmospheric auditorium ([legrandrex.com](http://legrandrex.com)). Jacques Haïk, the Tunisia-born producer, distributor and exhibitor who brought Chaplin to France and christened him Charlot, had contracted John Ebersson to work with his architect and designers. *Paris-Soir* called the result "the most beautiful temple that has ever been erected to the glory of Cinéma." Although another six *salles* have been built around it, at 2,750 *fauteuils* with two balconies, le Grand REX remains the largest single-screen auditorium in Europe. In October 1982, *le Ministère de la Culture* added it to the list of historic monuments.



Still counting a monumental 1.25 million admissions every year, le REX features a giant screen that can be moved to reveal a 13-meter-deep stage under an 18-meter proscenium arch (43 and 59 feet, respectively). In addition to concerts, conferences and awards, the stage also hosts Disney-themed shows and films that bring out le REX's famous water cascades.

If we're talking size, a detour to Spain is in order, where the **Kinepolis Madrid** stands proudly at the center of Ciudad de la Imagen as the largest cinema complex, not just in Europe, but in the entire world (kinepolis.com). Ranging from 200 to 1,000 *butacas* (facing a 25 by 10 m [82 by 33 foot] screen), its 25 auditoria hold a capacity crowd of 9,196 people. Its highest attendance was recorded back in 2001 with a staggering 3.6 million, but even at last year's 2.7 million moviegoers, Kinepolis Madrid remains the most visited in Europe.

When Madrid opened in September 1998, the world's first megaplex was already ten years old. Built on the outskirts near Belgium's famous Atomium, the 25-screen **Kinepolis Brussels/Bruxelles** stunned the public and theatrical exhibition communities alike. Its sheer size and volume offer stadium-style *capaciteit* for 7,563 patrons, ranging from 252 to 675 seats and including a 28 by 21 m IMAX *scherm* (92 by 69 feet). Bruxelles was chosen for the inaugural Cinema Expo in 1992, as the Bert and Claeys families had already left their mark on European exhibition. "Kinepolis was driven by the desire for innovation and an acute customer focus," reviews Myriam Dassonville, corporate communication manager of Kinepolis Group NV. Both are "qualities that its founders had insisted upon from the very beginning." Starting with a single neighborhood cinema in 1960s Harelbeke, Belgium, to date the truly pan-European expansion has yielded 302 screens at 21 locations with 91,670 seats in five countries.

In another entry for the record books, "Sweden has more cinema screens per capita than anywhere else in Europe." According to movie theatre historian and photographer Kjell Furberg, "Swedish cinemas are also interna-



THE PALACE SLOVANSKY DUM IN PRAGUE

tionally acclaimed for their architectonic and artistic prominence, and because there are still so many well-kept old theatres left." As

**Skandia** is a public dream chamber," he proposes, "a magical cult place and one of the most spiritual masterpieces of 1920s Swedish Classicism. It represents a unique public experience of international dignity—a meeting place centered on film."

The Skandia opened in 1923 for SF-Svensk Filmindustri (www.sf.se), which still owns the 572-seat theatre. Renowned architect Erik Gunnar Asplund selected a Neoclassicist style and had the interior, most of which is still intact, decorated by eight artists. Furberg describes the "magnificent textile art in the auditorium" of red velvet and embroidered ornamentations of gold and silver thread as "without parallel in Sweden." While "the balcony barriers are embellished with medallions and images of the gods from Roman, Greek and Nordic mythology," long gone from the semi-atmospheric arched ceiling are "60 silk-covered star-shaped lamps, which were extin-

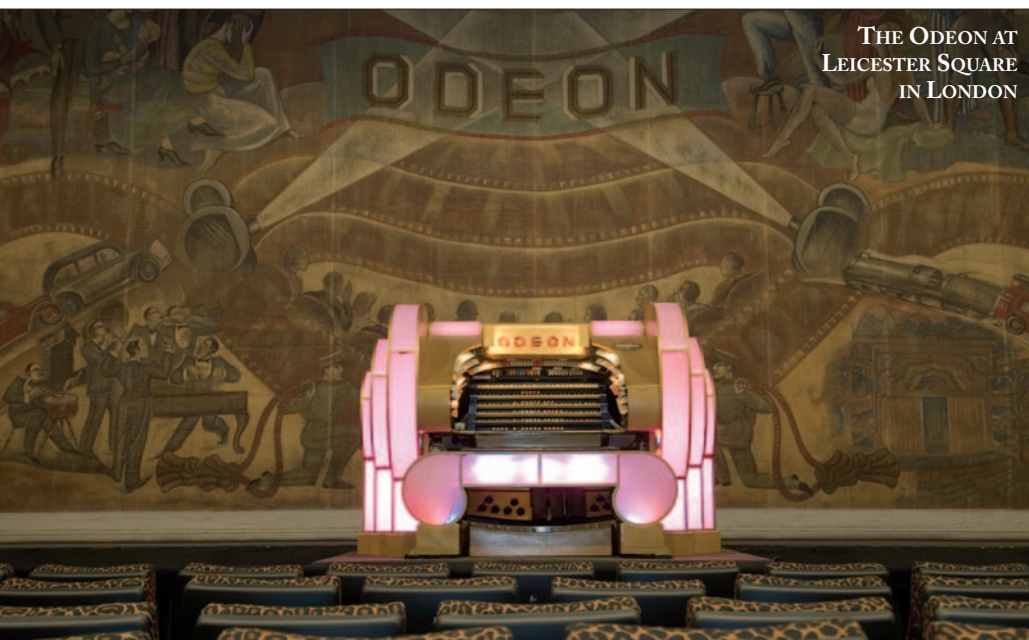


Furberg provides a most wonderful record in his book *Cinema Theatres in Sweden* (www.furberg.nu), we are happily relying on him to select one for our list. "Stockholm's

guished one by one before the start of the film."

Contending "the restoration that will start this year will not be that complete," Furberg hopes the lamps will eventually be restored, and that the 1926 Wurlitzer organ, safely stored at the moment, will have a comeback. His biggest concern remains the fact "that the Skandia is still not protected."

On Leicester Square in London, England, at the 1,679-seat Odeon, the main nostalgic attraction is the Compton Organ that rises on its own lift. "It is used to this day both for concerts and at public film shows before the feature," enthuses general manager Chris Hilton (www.odeon.co.uk). At **Odeon Leicester Square** "we hold between 17 and 25 premieres a year," he estimates, including "27 Royal Charity Premieres since 1992 and, this is mainly a guess, in excess of 200 since opening in November 1937." The balcony overlooking Leicester Square comes in handy for world premieres like every single James Bond film



THE ODEON AT LEICESTER SQUARE IN LONDON



with the exception of *Die Another Day*, which dared to debut at The Royal Albert Hall in 2002. The highest single and seven-day gross records go to *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*, though, with £100,270 (May 19, 2005) and £446,248 [€658,400; \$842,400] ultimately leading to a 2005 market share of 26.6% in the West End.

During the past seven years, the BAFTA Awards have been held in the Odeon. On the prestigious occasion, the 52-foot-wide by 26-foot-high (170 by 85 m) screen and four tons of speakers are hoisted into the roof to make room for the stars and elaborate sets. In 1989, five mezzanine screens—four with 60 seats, one with 50—were constructed in an alleyway on the side of the cinema. They normally play moveovers, also from sister theatre Odeon West End, a 1928 house that was split into 500 and 830 seats. Last but not least in Leicester Square are the Empire (1928) and Vue West End, a totally modern screen multiplex behind a glorious façade that the Warner Brothers built in 1938.

Showing flickering images since May of 1916, **Cine Ideal** was the first *cinematógrafo* in the heart of Madrid. Yelmo Films took over the site in 1990 and built eight screens, adding a ninth in 1996. Another complete overhaul and restoration of the original, stained-glass window adorned façade followed in 2002. Ideal's nine *salas*, ranging from 83 to 384 seats for a total of 1,725 *butacas*, are located on three levels including one auditorium underground.

With more than 600,000 yearly admissions, Ideal remains number one in the country, albeit for original-language versions and specialized films. "Locals usually go to this theatre to see art-house movies," explains Fernando Evole of Yelmo Cineplex and CEI Exhibitor of 2006 ([www.yelmocineplex.es](http://www.yelmocineplex.es)). "Foreign guests come to see big Hollywood productions" and Pedro Almodóvar "is one of Ideal's most faithful clients."

"We're about people, entertainment and fun," general director V.J. Maury says of Palace Cinemas. "A strategy of both new builds and acquisitions," including Hungary's Mammut multiplex in November 2005, he says, "has made Palace the leading cinema operator in the region." With 11 sites and 114 screens in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, "there are more to come."

Although the 12 screens of the Palace Novy Smíchov, located in the most popular shopping center of the Czech Republic, have been the number one in the country since their September 2001 opening under the Ster Century banner (Palace, backed by Argus Capital Partners



with founders Arthur Goldblatt and V.J. Maury, assumed complete control in 2002), we nonetheless chose the **Palace Slovansky dum** in the heart of downtown Prague.

Opened in November 2000, its ten *salas* and 1,839 seats were integrated into the beautifully restored Baroque/Art Nouveau Slavic House, one of the city's historical landmarks that was first mentioned in 1381 and last used as a reception hall for parties and balls. In addition



THE ARCADIA IN MELZO, ITALY.

to having presented the Czech Republic's first digital film on the country's only DLP Cinema projector (in a sponsorship from Pepsi Americas), Palace Slovansky dum regularly hosts musical performances, both live and taped. The Palace Art concept was introduced to appeal to hip downtown crowds, while the site also holds cine-parties and sneak previews for its large student audience. The Cinema Bar at the top-level concessions area and a popular café on the main floor complete the all-around

appeal of this unique site.

Digital projection is very much the focal point of our next two entrants, as they were among the first to seize the future. In the case of **Utopolis Kirchberg** in Luxembourg ([utopolis.com](http://utopolis.com)), all ten theatres—from 120 seats with double armrests and a 12-meter-wide screen, to 491 seats and a 24-meter-wide screen—will be digitally equipped by the time Cinema Expo is over, making the December 1996 multiplex of 2,700 seats the first 100% digital facility in Europe. One mil-

lion visitors per year give Kirchberg a 70% share of the country and 80% of the capital city.

With 2005 admissions of 1.1 million, the 13 screens and almost 3,000 seats of the **Blitz CineStar** in Zagreb have an equally impressive market share ([www.blitz-cinestar.hr](http://www.blitz-cinestar.hr)). Last year alone, the December 2003 city-center multiplex counted 78% of all tickets in the city and more than half of Croatia, with its box office accounting for 59% of the country. In addition to a variety of special programs with previews, midnight *pretpremiera*, children's *matinée* and 'Star Is Born' birthday parties as well as CinesCool shows for schools, customer service is key to such success.

CineStar Zagreb offers three weekdays with cheaper tickets and three different customer-loyalty cards that offer bonus points, not only for individual customers but also for business users and students. A dedicated Cinemati ticketing machine is at the disposal of Stars Club members, and two-sided LCD monitor displays at the box office allow everyone to see seating and availability

status. Large plasma screens with HD resolution for trailers and showtime information complement the all-digital pre-show set-up inside, which has turned the CineStar into a veritable event center.

While DLP Cinema installations are also on the horizon for both of CineStar's 2007 projects, Utopolis is in the midst of the upgrading the ten projectors the company has been running since its first installation in June 2004. Together with some 13 going to

Kinopolis in Belgium (plus five and three in France and Spain, respectively), the Benelux countries have certainly booked a majority of the continent's digital screens. Utopolis has an additional 20 scheduled for sites in Luxembourg, Belgium, France and The Netherlands.

A similar growth has been reported from Melzo near Milan, Italy. Opened on May 30, 1997, in the presence of the country's vice-premier, the **ARCADIA** ([multiplexarcadia.com](http://multiplexarcadia.com)) launched its first-generation 1.3K DLP Cinema installation back in December



THE CINECITTÀ IN NÜRNBERG, GERMANY.

2001. A few months later, when *Attack of the Clones* was shown, George Lucas even sent a video message: “Buonasera and Benvenuti... I am very excited to hear that you have such a great theatre and that you are showing the film digitally. That’s the way we meant it to be. And I’d like to say Hi! to all the Italian fans.”

During five years of remaining the “the only Italian cinema equipped for digital,” marketing manager Laura Fumagalli reports, “we have always paid close attention to the evolution of the equipment and gradually adopted all the technology that allowed us to make additional improvements to the presentation system.” At ARCADIA, that also means individual air-conditioning units for each seat, every digital sound format and THX-certification throughout all five auditoria. In addition to a good two-dozen digital films providing ample testing for its three 2K DLP Cine-

in a former bunker? In fact, as Wolfram Weber’s multiplex masterpiece is located in the city’s historic center, some 85% of the complex was built underground, without sacrificing beautiful views from its various lobbies, four restaurants and six cafés and bars. Not to mention an Open Air Kino on its rooftop. This mix of food and beverage options, unique ambiance and the best technology make CineCittá the place to be and one of the most successful cinema operations in the country.

Since opening in October 1995, CineCittá has grown to 5,000 seats in 18 *Kinos* (from 103 to 547, not counting IMAX, MAD, Open Air and the 32-seat private Matrix 1,400 x 1,050 Pixel DVD Studio), with no less than 4,000 square meters (43,000 sq. ft.) of lobby space. Here are some of the high points of the first ten years as seen by 18 mil-

moviegoing experience,” says Dundrum’s general manager Elaine Grange. “The services as well as the fantastic facilities on offer make this an amazing cinema.”

Part of the fun is an updated Art Deco design with twinkling red and black floor tiles, specially commissioned carpets, poster-adorned columns, an expansive mural and frosted-glass chandeliers suspended from a ceiling of golden swirls and flourishes. The four-story high main atrium links both floors as the tribute to the golden age of cinema continues inside the auditoria with velvet paneling and ultra-plush seating. Behind one of its dark, timber-framed doors, *Movies @ Dundrum* has Ireland’s first VIP offering. The Mezz awaits the discerning guest with leather reclining seats and beverage service from the private bar area.

The last stop on our tour of exceptional cinemas is also about luxury, though the combination of features is unparalleled anywhere else in the world. Located in an upscale shopping center of Istanbul, Turkey, the **AFM Uptown** may only have three screens and a total of 135 seats out of AFM Sinemalari’s 140 screens ([www.afm.com.tr](http://www.afm.com.tr)). But, since opening in 2003, the intimate luxury of reclining loungers on tiered risers and a glass-enclosed private box have made it “the theatre of choice for high-income customers, business leaders, celebrities and trendsetters,” confirms marketing specialist Çigdem Selgur. The special section offers couch seating for four, and the opportunity to smoke and to enjoy food from one of the nearby restaurants. All the while a separate DTS sound system provides optional language choices. As if this were not unique enough, the AFM Uptown’s design allows for daylight to come in until an automated moving system darkens the interior when the movie is about to begin.

As Turkey’s leading chain, Selgur says, “We aim to become the cinema operator ‘closest’ to its customers—closest in location, closest when they want to reach us, and closest to their hearts.” AFM’s motto certainly provides a fitting summary of all the cinemas featured here. It’s all about the heart and soul.

In addition to the VNU Expo and *FJI* teams, we appreciate the suggestions made by Elisabetta Brunella, Tim Ganser, Karsten-Peter Grummitt, Kurt Schwenk and Bernd Zickert. In addition to those quoted in the article, our thanks go to the following individuals for their help with providing photos and materials: Zorislav Augustic, Myriam Dasonville, Claude Dessouroux, Kate McFarlane, David Horacek, David Jelinek, Taina Ruppunen, Andrew Sage, Mónica Sardina Antón, Nico Simon and Luke Vetere.

As our list has been neither comprehensive nor conclusive, we invite all of you to send us your favorites and why they should be featured. And you won’t have to wait for Cinema Expo’s 25th anniversary, as we will gladly include them in our monthly European Update. **FJI**



ma projectors and a variety of different servers, it is the creative fire and energy with which the multiplex was designed that put ARCADIA on the European map.

At 630 seats, Energia is the largest house with a 30 by 16.5-meter screen (98 by 54 ft.), while Acqua, Aria, Fuoco and Terra feature 220 *posti* each and *schermi* of no less than 18 by 9.5 meters (59 by 31 ft.). Designed on three levels “to emulate the passage of the cinematic experience” from meeting in the grand atrium (with box office, bar, movie shop and children’s place) to visible projection booths, the color palette further reflects the given auditoria names with green for Water, blue for Air, red for Fire and ocher for Earth. Surrounded by a portico, this *colosso architettonico* easily evokes the image of a cathedral of movies to which some 700,000 pilgrims come every year.

If seeing a film at ARCADIA promises a religious experience, **CineCittá** in Nürnberg, Germany ([www.cinecitta.de](http://www.cinecitta.de)), will make you feel like you’ve arrived in movie theatre heaven. After all, where else can you find an IMAX Dome and 3D giant screen along with a 58-seat MAD motion-ride attraction built

lion moviegoers: When CineCittá welcomed its two-millionth guest in March 1997, three additional auditoria had just been added, followed by the 1998 introduction of Asian cuisine at Indochine and the 1999 opening of Café Dante. Up to that time, options included American Diner and Italian Trattoria fare, coffee, ice cream, lobby bars and the rooftop *Biergarten*. In January of that same year, one lucky moviegoer became visitor number five million and by November 2001 the number had climbed to ten million. In December, three more screens opened along the way to its 518-seat IMAX.

The care and attention, if not good old-fashioned guts, it takes to mount such undertakings can only be accomplished by dedicated independents, be it Melzo, Nürnberg or South County Dublin, Ireland. Jointly owned and operated by the Osbourne Spurling and Andrew O’Gorman families since October of last year, **Movies @ Dundrum** offer 12 screens on two levels seating from 126 to 367 for a total of 2,175 ([www.moviesatdundrum.ie](http://www.moviesatdundrum.ie)). For one of the fastest-growing cities in Europe, they envisioned “a classical and comfortable