



Reimagining the Future of Cinema



Nicolas Chican, Co-Founder, Ōma Cinema takes some time out to sit down for RLI and discuss how in these unusual times it is the right time to utilise the best of the past to build for the future.

Audience appetite for cinema is undiminished even after over a year of lockdown and streaming. A survey from CinemaFirst in May this year found that well over a third (38 per cent) were planning on flooding back to the big screen in the first month of reopening, and that a further third (34 per cent) would be joining them in the following months. Its appeal is clearly a strong and emotive one, and this is something which should come as good news for broader leisure developers and operators.

It's well recognised that a cinema can act as a 'keystone' site for a town or area, serving as the mothership which also attracts associated businesses such as restaurants, bars and other leisure enterprises. Hospitality businesses have arguably been hit hardest over the past year and will welcome the cinema playing its role of attracting people back to see the latest releases and making a night of it beyond the film. However, cinemas do also have to face one issue in their reopening head on.

While audiences are coming back, and the flow of new releases to the screens is restarting, these aren't precisely the same audiences as before. Streaming windows for new releases have undeniably shortened, and even pre-pandemic, operators were addressing the issue of attracting younger audiences in particular into cinema to create long term affinities for the big screen. It's a simple fact – once people have been to the cinema when they are young, they are often fans for life. But new generations need to connect to the experience in a fresh way. The pandemic has simply exacerbated these issues, and while love for the big screen experience continues, they will rise to the surface yet again only stronger, unless cinema operators start to think differently about why people love going to the flicks. To move cinema on and engage new generations, it's important for operators to be thinking not about building the best of the past, but reimagining the best of the future.

Cinema is a collective experience; it is all about sharing the viewing experience with a number of people at the same time. It is also increasingly a special time these days, when people can immerse themselves in a film without distractions from other screens or alerts. But it's also not changed in some time. The advent of the multiplex might have made it easier to get lots of bums on seats for the big releases, but at a time when sitting close to a stranger is a real concern, rows of seating are not what people are looking for. When did the multiplex become a commodity rather than an exciting night out?

The Ōma cinema design does away with rows of seating, instead using the back wall of the cinema to place the audience on a number of floating balconies. Each balcony can have its own unique layout, from sofas to small numbers of seats to more typical but limited rows of seats, giving operators flexibility to offer a range of different options to cinemagoers in one screen. But more than this flexibility, it gives cinemagoers a chance to truly immerse themselves in a movie again. The seats can be placed much closer to the screen, meaning that audiences don't

risk getting stuck behind tall people with restricted views of the screen again. It has been designed from the ground up so that every seat in the house is the best seat in the house.

Beyond breathing fresh life into the physical space of the cinema, rethinking the layout in front of the screen has the effect of creating a premiere experience, as the space itself is part of the appeal. It is conceived to act as a destination in its own right – it repurposes the cinemagoing experience to recapture its emotion and magic. When you look at other areas of cinema exhibition which are doing well, it is the options which add something new to the experience which are connecting with people. Chains like Everyman and Picturehouse have combined elements of intimacy and independent operator sensibilities which help audiences to feel like they are attending something more unique than a 'big box' multiplex. But simply by rethinking how the interior of the auditorium is set out can give even large cinemas with lots of tickets to sell a way to handle large occupancies, but in a way which still feels cosy and intimate.

Cinema's place in people's hearts is long lasting – but it has grown and evolved over time from small screens and silent movies into plush picture palaces, to multiplexes and now the reinvigoration of independent chains. We would argue that another rethink is not only part of how the cinema can thrive – it can help those ancillary businesses like restaurant chains and nightlife establishments to bring people back through the doors too. Cinemas never operate in a vacuum – and leisure operators may well find that, by making changes to their physical screens themselves to suit post-pandemic needs, it attracts business back to the surrounding areas too.

Cinema doesn't need to reinvent the wheel to get people excited about coming back to the movies again. The physical locations don't have to change on the outside. But building trust with audiences is going to be important as we all move out of lockdown and look to put the pandemic behind us. Many cinemas have close symbiotic relationships with the leisure establishments and town centres which surround them. By just relooking at how they use their space to fit audiences in, it may not only encourage more of those audiences back – but encourage them to stay and enjoy those other attractions too.

