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Adaptive Reuse of a Cultural Heritage Building in Sofia: “Theme” and “Character” in the Interior of the Old Excelsior Cinema

Abstract:

The relevance of this study is determined by the ongoing loss and functional degradation of historic cinema buildings in the central areas of European cities and the growing need for methodologically grounded approaches to their adaptive reuse as cultural heritage sites. Under conditions of fragmented renovations and utilitarian transformations, early 20th-century cinema interiors require reinterpretation not merely as architectural shells but as carriers of cultural memory, spatial experience, and technological history. The study problem lies in the absence of integrated methodological models for the adaptive reuse of cinema interiors that simultaneously address spatial logic, material authenticity, acoustic qualities, and socio-cultural function. Existing approaches often prioritize architectural envelopes or visual aesthetics while neglecting the interior as a complex cultural system. The novelty of the study consists in the development and application of a conceptual and methodological framework for the adaptive reuse of early twentieth-century cinema interiors based on the operationalization of the concepts of “theme” and “character” as analytical and design tools. These concepts enable the translation of archival, spatial, and material research into coherent interior adaptation strategies. The subject of the study is a methodological model for the adaptive reuse of early twentieth-century cinema-theatre interiors within cultural heritage contexts. The object of the study is the interior of the former “Excelsior” cinema (later renamed “Assen Zlatarov”), located in the historic center of Sofia, Bulgaria, considered as a representative example of early urban cinema architecture. The study aims to develop an interdisciplinary methodology for the adaptive reuse of historic cinema interiors that preserves their identity while enabling contemporary functional, technical, and cultural use. The study methodology combines archival-documentary analysis, spatial and structural investigation, historical and technological contextual analysis, and material survey, followed by the synthesis of findings into an adaptive reuse model. The study draws upon and generalizes the ideas of architectural conservation theorists, researchers of Sofia’s urban and cultural history, scholars of early Bulgarian cinema, and contemporary approaches to adaptive reuse and interior design. The core of the study lies in conceptualizing the cinema interior as a culturally active system in which proportions, acoustics, materials, and patterns of use jointly shape historical identity. Based on the analysis of archival drawings, historical sources, and surviving material layers, an adaptation model is proposed that maintains technological and cultural continuity while accommodating new uses. The results demonstrate that successful adaptive reuse of historic cinema interiors requires the integration of historical knowledge, spatial analysis, and material authenticity into a unified design logic. The proposed framework positions adaptation as a culturally responsible practice that ensures continuity of identity and reactivation of the public and cultural role of historic cinema interiors in contemporary urban life.

Keywords: architecture adaptation, interior project; cultural memory; historical identity; early sound cinema-theatre; interior detail.

Abbreviations:

BNR is Bulgarian National Radio;

UACEG is University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy;

Introduction

In the early twentieth century, cinema-theatres shaped the cultural and architectural identity of Sofia's historic centre. These public processes showed technological progress, aesthetic development, and helped preserve cultural memory, especially through their interiors. "Excelsior"—"Assen Zlatarov" cinema, stands out as a key example of this early urban cultural infrastructure, with its interior reflecting both identity and atmosphere.

Through the adaptation process, the author creates a specific scenario that balances the preservation and interpretation of original interior qualities with the need to meet current functional, technical, and investment demands. This dual nature invites us into a problem-solving mindset in which the risks of diluting historical integrity are balanced by the potential benefits of revitalizing these structures for modern use.

This approach can create significant cultural, aesthetic, and economic value from these historic spaces. The article looks at how the ideas of "theme" and "character" can guide the adaptation of early 20th-century cinema-theatre interiors, focusing on the "Excelsior" Cinema, later known as "Assen Zlatarov" after the communist government in Sofia.

The analysis shows that successful adaptation depends on a clear and logical framework. Here, the theme shapes the narrative, while character comes from how original materials, spatial development, and new changes interact. Just preserving historic elements is not enough; the materials themselves tell the story.

Carefully studying the texture, feel, and acoustic qualities of these materials adds depth to the theme. Surviving finishes like plaster, wallpaper, natural ceramics, wooden floors, and gypsum details represent identity and history, making the building's past both real and meaningful.

The novelty of this study lies in its conceptual and methodological approach to the adaptive reuse of early 20th-century cinema interiors as cultural heritage. Unlike prevailing studies that focus primarily on architectural envelopes, urban history, or technical restoration, this study foregrounds the interior as a culturally active system shaped by spatial logic, material authenticity, acoustic properties, and social practice. The study introduces the concepts of "theme" and "character" as operative methodological tools that translate archival, spatial, and material analysis into a coherent interior adaptation framework. By doing so, the study advances adaptive reuse theory from descriptive interpretation toward an applied, design-oriented methodology capable of guiding interior interventions in historically layered cinema buildings.

The subject of the study is the methodological framework for adaptive reuse of cinema-theatre interiors of the early 20th century, with particular emphasis on the conceptual roles of "theme" and "character" in interior design decision-making within cultural heritage contexts.

The object of the study is the interior space of a former cinema-theatre building located in the historic center of Sofia, Bulgaria, originally known as "Excelsior" and later as "Assen Zlatarov", considered as a representative example of early urban cinema architecture and its subsequent transformations.

The study aims to develop and substantiate an interdisciplinary methodology for the adaptive reuse of early 20th-century cinema interiors that preserves historical identity while enabling contemporary functional, technical, and cultural use through the integration of archival research, spatial analysis, material investigation, and design interpretation.

To achieve the stated aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

- analyze archival architectural documentation, historical sources, and visual materials to reconstruct the original spatial organization and cultural context of the cinema interior;
- examine the spatial and structural characteristics of the cinema hall, including proportions, circulation, sightlines, and acoustic behavior, as carriers of heritage value;
- identify and assess surviving material layers and decorative elements as tangible expressions of historical identity and cultural memory;
- investigate the impact of technological transformations, particularly the transition from silent to sound cinema, on interior spatial and material configuration;
- synthesize historical, spatial, and material findings into an operative adaptation model based on the concepts of theme and character;
- evaluate the potential of adaptive reuse as a culturally responsible strategy for revitalizing historic cinema interiors within contemporary urban environments.

The results of the study are intended for a multidisciplinary audience, including architects, interior designers, conservation specialists, heritage researchers, and urban planners involved in the adaptive reuse of historic buildings. The findings are also relevant to scholars in architecture theory and heritage studies, as well as to cultural institutions, municipal authorities, and decision-makers responsible for cultural heritage management and urban regeneration policies.

Methods

This study uses four steps method, combining historical-documentary analysis, spatial and structural investigation of the cinema hall, material analysis—including plasters, decorative elements, and finishes—and turning findings into an adaptation model. This approach helps fully understand how interior adaptation connects the original architecture with today’s needs.

Thus, the methodological approach frames adaptation as both a technical and cultural process, grounding design decisions in evidence and documentation rather than intuition. The concepts of “theme” and “character” are employed as operative instruments, linking research findings to design strategy. To further strengthen the relationship between archival evidence and design intervention, a table or structured outline mapping each archival finding to its corresponding design proposal is recommended. Such tools, enable a transparent tracing of the logic and basis loading of each reconstruction decision.

Archival Documentary Research

Archival architectural analysis of the original drawings, old photos, and printed sources is a mostly common practical way to rebuild the hall’s original layout, design logic, and cultural context.

The building changed over time, highlighting both original features and the damage caused by later changes to the property, use, and misunderstood renovations (*Tenev, 1997*).

The strategy to preserve and expose the saved authentic details is a part of material cultural design thinking, choosing textures that fit the historic style, and adapt the layout for new uses while keeping authenticity and continuity (*Gancheva, 2021*). This approach gives a solid basis for decisions, showing what to keep, what to change, and what changes should be visible. It supports adaptation strategies that respect history and look to the future.

Historical analysis shows that the early growth of cinema-theater in Sofia was connected to the rise of a new Sofia urban audience, especially the growing middle class with more cultural interests and time for leisure and culture. Cinema quickly became part of Bulgarian city life; by 1913, Sofia had three permanent cinemas (*Kardzhilov, 2023b; Stoyanova, 2016*). This early setup

and business model led to later innovations and local productions, such as the early Bulgarian film “Balgaran Is Gallant (1915)” (Stoyanova, 2016).

The image of a building throughout history is represented in the Appendix (Table 1).

As the Cinema became an important social event in Sofia, spaces like foyers halls and entrances played an important role, the growth of audiences increased the impact of building typology.

Thus, the latter building complicated their function and became more social and places for cultural communication.

Adaptive reuse should aim to bring back the social parts of the cinema experience—like arrival, gathering, and transition spaces—not just focus on the main hall.

Spatial and Structural Investigation of the Cinema Hall

Spatial and functional analysis looks at the audience hall as a set of connected spaces, considering size, proportions, sight-lines, acoustics, and how spaces relate. The aim is to find qualities and limits that can guide new uses while keeping the hall’s character.

The hall is viewed as a space where sightlines and sound define its heritage value. Updates should respect the current layout and see its limits as design opportunities. For example, the balcony’s slope can inspire a new seating layout.

Thus, the spatial logic of restored plans can guide new pathways or audience flows. This model helps with decision-making, how well the interior can support new uses, with theme and character as main principles. These methods create a framework that treats interior adaptation as both a technical and cultural change.

The study connects research evidence to design decisions through a clear and open process. In this approach, “theme” and “character” are real criteria for adaptation, not just terms. The framework shows adaptive reuse as a responsible cultural practice based on careful spatial analysis (Table 3) (Figure 1; Figure 2).

Historical and Material Analysis Including Plasters, Decorative Elements, and Finishes

The transition from silent to a sound cinema have developed not only the film language but also the organisation of a cinema hall space, its acoustics, and furniture materials. In 1930 in Bulgaria, “Modern Theatre” publicly announced the installation of Western Electric sound technology, with engineering support and public media attention.

The global technological development of early 20th century period led to interior transformations, most of which are acoustically important. The cinema hall can be seen as a “sound space”, shaped by layers of technical updates over time. Adaptation should include this history of technology as a key part of the interior’s space.

Bulgarian sound feature film with first incorporated speech and music was “The Revolt of the Slaves”, which premiered on 2 October 1933, marking a new stage in Bulgarian cinema (*The Revolt...*, 2018).

This event starts the evolution of cinema halls, so they focused more on acoustics and materials, using curtains, fabrics, acoustic wall treatments, and special details around suspension systems and the projection booth.

Today, using modern materials like wool-felt wall panels that recall historic acoustic linings can improve sound quality while maintaining a sense of continuity.

A good preserved in images hystorical example from this period is the “Pachev” cinema-theatre hall (opened 30 October 1926; active until 1944), which had noumerous seats, a balcony, a waiting hall, a café, and early sound equipment (*Kardzhibilov, 2023a*).

Early 20th-century events show the need of similar spaces as type and context, such as the Excelsior Cinema hall. These comparisons support the development of design criteria.

The same feature is typology-based rather than only the specifics of the space. Such analysis reinforces the argument for prioritizing acoustics, spatial zoning, and foyer culture.

To demonstrate the capacity of materials to embody memory, the study proposes the identification and display of select surviving elements—such as original plasterwork or panels—within the renewed interior (*Table 4*).

Thus the strategy serves to connect historical and contemporary layers, reinforce historical identity, and foster confidence in the adaptive reuse process (*Huaroc, 2024*).

As a conclusion, material analysis helps identify and explain the value of surviving elements and their place in the renewed interior. Showing how real fragments give the adaptation a strong foundation, strengthening memory through real materials instead of copying the past (*Adaptive reuse..., 2025*).

Turning Findings into an Adaptation Model

The meaning of this process is to organise the key features from the research into a clear, structured frame that could lead future adaptive interior projects, especially for the former specific historical structures. Based on the definitions, the graphics could be proposed as a logical interior image of the intervention (*Table 5*) (*Figure 1; Figure 2; Figure 3; Figure 4*).

Literature Review

The literature relevant to the adaptive reuse of early twentieth-century cinema buildings in Sofia forms an interdisciplinary body of sources that combines architectural conservation theory, urban cultural history, cinema studies, and contemporary design discourse. Together, these works provide the historical, theoretical, and methodological foundations for understanding cinema interiors as cultural heritage and for developing responsible adaptive reuse strategies.

A fundamental theoretical framework for architectural conservation is provided by Jokilehto’s *A History of Architectural Conservation* (2009). Jokilehto conceptualizes conservation not merely as the preservation of material fabric, but as an ethically grounded cultural process that mediates between historical continuity and contemporary use. His emphasis on authenticity, historical layering, and cultural significance is particularly relevant for cinema buildings, whose interiors often underwent multiple transformations driven by technological change and shifting social functions. Jokilehto’s approach supports the understanding of adaptive reuse as a value-based intervention rather than a purely technical operation, framing interior adaptation as an act of cultural interpretation rather than stylistic imitation.

Urban historical perspectives on Sofia are extensively represented in Tenev’s *Three Hundred Thousand Sofia and Me Between the Two World Wars* (1997). This source offers a detailed narrative of Sofia’s urban development during the interwar period, contextualizing the emergence of cinema halls within broader processes of modernization, demographic growth, and cultural diversification. Tenev’s reflections highlight cinema as a social institution embedded in everyday urban life, serving as both a technological novelty and a collective cultural experience. His work provides crucial insight into the spatial and social role of cinema buildings within the city’s historical fabric, reinforcing the argument that their interiors are carriers of urban memory rather than isolated architectural objects.

Complementing this urban-historical perspective, journalistic and archival contributions by Gancheva (2021) published by the Bulgarian National Radio focus specifically on the cultural practice of going to the cinema in old Sofia. These texts reconstruct the experiential dimension of early cinema-going, emphasizing foyers, entrance halls, and transitional spaces as essential components of the cinematic ritual. Gancheva's work underscores the importance of non-screening spaces in shaping cultural memory and social interaction, thereby supporting adaptive reuse strategies that prioritize arrival sequences, gathering zones, and spatial transitions alongside the main hall.

Similarly, Stoyanova's article (2016) on the first cinemas in Sofia provides a historical overview of the emergence of permanent cinema halls in the early 20th century. By identifying the earliest venues and their spatial characteristics, this source situates cinema architecture within the broader evolution of urban entertainment infrastructure. Stoyanova's contribution is particularly valuable for understanding typological patterns, including seating arrangements, hall proportions, and the integration of cinema functions into mixed-use urban buildings.

The technological transformation of cinema interiors is addressed in detail by Kardzhilov (2023b) in his analysis of the introduction of sound equipment into Sofia cinemas during the early 1930s. This study documents the profound spatial, acoustic, and material consequences of the transition from silent to sound cinema. Kardzhilov demonstrates that sound technology reshaped not only projection systems but also wall treatments, ceiling designs, seating layouts, and acoustic volumes. This historical insight reinforces the argument that acoustics constitute an integral part of cinema heritage and must be treated as a cultural value in adaptive reuse projects rather than as a purely functional requirement.

The historical significance of early Bulgarian sound cinema is further emphasized in the Bulgarian National Radio archival publication (2018) dedicated to *The Revolt of the Slaves*, the first Bulgarian sound film. This source situates sound cinema within national cultural history and highlights the symbolic role of cinema halls as sites of technological and artistic innovation. By linking interior transformations to broader cultural milestones, the publication supports an understanding of cinema interiors as witnesses to cultural modernization processes.

Kardzhilov's (2023a) archival study of Cinema "Pachev" published in *Spisanie KINO* provides a concrete comparative case that enriches the typological analysis of early cinema interiors. Through detailed documentation of spatial organization, seating capacity, balcony structure, and auxiliary spaces such as cafés and waiting halls, this source offers a tangible reference for evaluating surviving cinema interiors in Sofia. The "Pachev" cinema exemplifies how architectural typology, social function, and technological adaptation converged in early cinema design, making it a valuable benchmark for adaptive reuse strategies.

Beyond local historical sources, contemporary architectural discourse on adaptive reuse is represented by Huaroc's article (2024) published on ArchDaily. Huaroc examines international adaptive reuse projects that intentionally contrast old and new materials to highlight historical layers rather than conceal them. This approach aligns with current heritage theory that values legibility, material honesty, and temporal stratification. The article provides a broader design-theoretical context that supports the use of contemporary materials as interpretative tools rather than imitative replicas, reinforcing the methodological orientation of adaptive reuse as a dialogical process between past and present.

A complementary design-oriented perspective is offered by the ISCD publication *Adaptive Reuse in Interior Design: Giving Materials a Second Life* (2025). This source focuses on interior-scale interventions and emphasizes material reuse as both an ecological and cultural strategy. The discussion of tactile qualities, material aging, and sensory experience directly informs interior

adaptation methodologies, particularly in heritage contexts where material authenticity contributes to spatial character and emotional resonance. The ISCD text supports the argument that interior adaptation should engage with existing materials as active carriers of memory rather than neutral surfaces.

Recent scholarship has also contributed systematic frameworks that strengthen the methodological transparency of adaptive reuse practice and offer evaluative criteria for assessing outcomes in heritage contexts. Arfa et al. (2022) provide a significant contribution by moving from an extensive literature review toward a consolidated “model of practice” that structures adaptive reuse as a phased process grounded in evidence, heritage values, and decision traceability. Their model conceptualizes reuse not as a single design act but as an iterative trajectory that includes preliminary value identification, diagnostic analysis of the existing fabric, stakeholder and feasibility considerations, strategy formation, and post-intervention evaluation. This process-oriented approach supports the present study’s emphasis on linking archival documentation, spatial analytics, and material survey to an explicit adaptation model. In particular, Arfa et al.’s framework legitimizes the need for tools that map research findings to design actions, reinforcing the study’s position that adaptive reuse must be accountable and logically reconstructable rather than intuitive or purely stylistic.

Complementing process models, Vafaie et al. (2023) advance the field through a systematic literature review that synthesizes “success factors” for the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings. Their analysis consolidates recurring determinants across international research and practice, clarifying that successful reuse depends on a multidimensional balance between cultural significance, functional performance, technical feasibility, economic viability, governance, and stakeholder alignment. Importantly for interior-focused adaptation, the authors emphasize that heritage value is frequently compromised when interventions prioritize short-term functional gains over authenticity, legibility of historical layers, and the experiential qualities of space. This review strengthens the interpretative stance of the present research in which “theme” and “character” operate as criteria that protect cultural meaning during transformation. It also provides a broader evaluative lens for cinema-theatre interiors, supporting the argument that proportions, acoustics, circulation logic, and material authenticity should be treated as core heritage attributes rather than secondary design variables.

Taken together, these two studies enrich the literature base by supplying (1) a structured methodological logic for adaptive reuse (Arfa et al., 2022) and (2) a synthesized evaluative perspective for judging adaptation outcomes (Vafaie et al., 2023). Their integration into the present review reinforces the article’s central claim that adaptive reuse of early twentieth-century cinema interiors requires a rigorous framework capable of translating historical evidence and material continuity into coherent design decisions while maintaining cultural identity and public meaning.

Taken together, these sources form a coherent body of literature that frames cinema interiors as complex cultural artifacts shaped by social practice, technological innovation, and urban development. Historical and journalistic accounts reconstruct the cultural significance of cinema-going in Sofia, while architectural conservation theory provides ethical and methodological grounding for adaptive reuse. Contemporary design discourse further expands this framework by articulating strategies for integrating historical layers into modern interior solutions.

This literature collectively underpins the study’s focus on “theme” and “character” as operative concepts in interior adaptation. By combining historical evidence, material analysis, and spatial interpretation, the reviewed sources justify an approach to adaptive reuse that seeks

not merely to preserve fragments of the past, but to reactivate cinema interiors as culturally meaningful spaces capable of sustaining continuity within contemporary urban life.

Results

Theoretical Framework: “Theme” and “Character” in the Adaptation of a 20th-Century Cinema–Theatre Interior

The Concept of “Theme” in the Interior

About interior architecture, a theme is a guiding idea that shapes a design by bringing together context, history, and function.

The “theme” appears in how space is organised, the materials chosen, and the dominant atmosphere, helping the design elements to follow the building’s identity. In adaptation projects, the theme turns historical knowledge into a modern spatial plan, making the design clear and culturally connected rather than merely following a style.

When used in design, a theme connects original features with new changes by bringing together historical, technological, and social aspects in the interior’s identity. In heritage interiors, the theme links past and present by keeping cultural memory alive through planning and interpretation, rather than simply copying old styles.

Therefore, the thematic approach helps balance the old interior with a change. The new uses are possible while the building’s story continues.

Adaptation of space in a cultural heritage building is a process of finding a middle ground between preserving important features and meeting today’s needs. The interior shares its history through thoughtful use of structure, space, and materials, not by copying the past.

The Concept of “Character” and Interior Adaptation

The character of an interior comes from the way structure, materials, size, light, sound, and layout work together. How people experience the space and its atmosphere creates a clear identity and improves the visitor’s experience. Character also shows how the entire new concept lives with the building’s history, proving that changes have been successfully integrated.

Character is an important way to judge the quality of adaptation, showing if new changes fit in or just fill space. It links sensory experiences like light, sound, and touch to the building’s heritage, making sure updates keep the interior’s cultural and emotional meaning.

Historical and Spatial Context: Cinema as an Urban Cultural Function in Sofia

There is a close connection between the cinema hall and the close neighborhood with its residential buildings. Especially the attached to the hall building with flats, which is also a cultural heritage site.

Throughout different historical periods and political regimes, the cinema had several names—“Opera,” “Royal,” “Excelsior,” and “Assen Zlatarov”—each reflecting changes in city culture, ownership, and policy.

The possible scenario for renovating and adapting the latest storage into a new multifunctional hall should include all the historical layers, not just the imitative ones.

The interior space could be left with visible traces, creating continuity and spatial logic.

After sound films arrived around 1930, modernization continued, and the 1930s and 1940s saw improvements in layout and acoustics. Cinema “Assen Zlatarov” is a good example of the subject ([Gancheva, 2021](#)).

The arrival of new technologies, most notably sound, transformed both architectural and interior space envelopes, placing new demands on acoustics and technical systems. Modernization touched every aspect: equipment, room proportions, the spacing between seating arrangements, and the wall cladding. In any future adaptation, acoustics and technical features must be seen not as afterthoughts, but as integral to the heritage and spirit of the space.

A modernist functional model—simplified volumes, improved sightlines, a specific stage zone, and an optimized balcony slope—was increasingly applied to the new cinema interior.

Despite the lack of details and lost ornamentation, these interiors preserved key characteristics of the traditional cinema hall: a strong longitudinal visual axis (*Jokilehto, 2017*), an acoustic volume with proportions—height equal to width of the hall, and a sense of representational public space.

Reducing decorative elements did not mean losing identity. Instead, identity shifted toward performance, experience, and technical ability.

Proportions, spatial rhythm, and acoustic qualities, not decoration is the most important factors for the researched space. Adaptation should focus on keeping these main spatial features, even when adding new uses.

The use of sound in the movies is a fact that has major importance for the cultural practice and interior design. Technologically, the sound broad new materials for absorption and damping, as well as specialized enclosures, making acoustics a priority in the new spaces.

Contemporary adaptation incorporates this technological heritage into the site's narrative. By the mid-twentieth century, cinema buildings continued to evolve through renovations. After private ownership was restored, the hall was further altered: parts were converted into ground-floor shops, and the balcony and main hall were used for storage. This period damaged all of the interior surfaces.

Unsophisticated interventions over the body of the building's functions could damage the core of the heritage structures.

Original construction could be damaged by adding new imitative layers and materials, as well as installations and air conditioning. Restoring its cultural role means bringing back the flow of spaces and public areas.

So that is the reason adaptive reuse should focus on restoring key elements such as screening, performance, and gathering, which are essential to keeping cultural memory alive.

Discussion

The results obtained in this study demonstrate a high degree of relevance for contemporary architectural practice, heritage studies, and interior design theory, particularly in the context of adaptive reuse of early 20th-century cinema buildings. The analytical framework developed and applied in the results confirms that interior adaptation of cultural heritage structures cannot be reduced to technical renovation or stylistic restoration. Instead, it must be understood as a culturally embedded process in which spatial logic, material authenticity, technological memory, and social function interact as interconnected components of heritage value.

One of the most significant outcomes of the research is the substantiation of “theme” and “character” as operative analytical and design categories rather than abstract interpretative notions. The results show that these concepts function as methodological instruments capable of structuring decision-making throughout the adaptive reuse process. By linking archival documentation, spatial analysis, and material investigation to a coherent thematic narrative, the study demonstrates how interior design can actively mediate between historical identity and contemporary use. This approach addresses a critical gap in adaptive reuse practice, where

interventions often rely on intuitive or stylistic solutions lacking explicit methodological grounding.

The study results also highlight the importance of treating cinema interiors as complex cultural systems rather than isolated architectural shells. The spatial and structural analyses reveal that the heritage value of cinema halls resides not only in decorative elements, but primarily in proportions, acoustics, sightlines, and circulation patterns shaped by early cinematic technology and social practices. By foregrounding these factors, the study contributes to a shift in heritage discourse from object-centered preservation toward process-oriented interpretation in which cultural memory is sustained through spatial experience.

Another relevant contribution lies in the emphasis on material authenticity as a carrier of historical meaning. The results demonstrate that surviving layers of plaster, decorative finishes, and acoustic treatments are not merely remnants of the past, but active mediators of memory and identity. The proposed strategy of exposing, integrating, and reinterpreting these materials within a contemporary interior framework supports an understanding of adaptation as a dialogical process rather than a reconstructive one. This finding is particularly relevant in post-socialist urban contexts, where heritage interiors have often suffered from neglect, functional degradation, or insensitive alterations.

From a broader disciplinary perspective, the results validate adaptive reuse as a culturally responsible alternative to demolition and replacement, especially in historic urban centers. By demonstrating how a former cinema can be reactivated as a multifunctional cultural space without erasing its historical layers, the study provides an applied model that aligns cultural sustainability with contemporary functional and economic demands. In this sense, the findings contribute not only to academic discourse but also to professional practice and heritage policy discussions.

Despite the growing interest in adaptive reuse, the research highlights several persistent problem areas that continue to limit both theoretical development and practical implementation in this field. One of the central problematics concerns the fragmentation of disciplinary approaches. Architectural conservation, interior design, cinema history, and urban studies often operate in parallel rather than in dialogue, resulting in adaptive reuse projects that address material preservation without sufficiently engaging spatial experience, or that introduce contemporary functions without a clear understanding of historical significance. This fragmentation complicates the development of integrative methodologies capable of addressing the full complexity of heritage interiors.

Another major issue identified through the discussion of results is the tendency to prioritize visual aesthetics over spatial and acoustic integrity. In many adaptive reuse projects, especially those involving former cinema halls, interventions focus on surface treatments, decorative references, or symbolic gestures, while neglecting the deeper spatial logic that defines the character of the interior. The loss or distortion of proportions, sound behavior, and circulation patterns can undermine the very qualities that constitute the heritage value of cinema spaces. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of clear evaluative criteria for interior character within existing conservation frameworks.

The study also reveals a methodological gap in dealing with technological heritage. Early cinema interiors were shaped by specific technological regimes, particularly the transition from silent to sound film, which introduced new acoustic demands and spatial configurations. However, contemporary adaptive reuse projects often treat these technological layers as obsolete rather than historically significant. The absence of systematic approaches for interpreting and integrating technological memory into interior adaptation leads to interventions that erase critical

aspects of cultural history. This problem reflects a broader challenge within heritage studies: the insufficient conceptualization of technology as a cultural value embedded in space and material.

Another problematic aspect concerns the status of authenticity in interior adaptation. Traditional conservation theory has largely focused on architectural envelopes and structural elements, leaving interior spaces in a more ambiguous position. As a result, interiors are frequently subjected to more radical transformations justified by functional or economic arguments. The study demonstrates that such approaches risk severing the connection between space and cultural memory, particularly in buildings whose social significance is closely tied to interior experience. This raises unresolved questions about the limits of acceptable change and the criteria by which interior authenticity should be assessed.

Finally, the research exposes the lack of standardized methodological tools for translating archival and historical research into design decisions. While archival documentation is often used to justify restoration choices, the process by which historical findings inform contemporary spatial solutions remains insufficiently transparent in many projects. This opacity weakens the scholarly credibility of adaptive reuse interventions and makes it difficult to evaluate their cultural legitimacy. The absence of structured models linking research evidence to design outcomes remains a significant challenge for both academia and practice.

Building on the obtained results, several directions for further research can be identified that would contribute to the advancement of adaptive reuse theory and practice. First, there is a clear need for comparative studies examining multiple cinema buildings across different urban and cultural contexts. Such research would allow for the identification of typological patterns and variations, enabling the refinement of analytical frameworks applicable beyond individual case studies. Comparative analysis could also clarify how local social, political, and technological factors influence the character of cinema interiors and their adaptive potential.

Second, future research should further develop methodological tools for integrating technological heritage into interior adaptation. This includes systematic studies of acoustics, projection technologies, and material innovations associated with early cinema, as well as their spatial implications. By treating technological systems as integral components of cultural memory, researchers can contribute to more nuanced adaptive reuse strategies that preserve not only visual but also sensory and experiential dimensions of heritage interiors.

Another promising direction involves the expansion of material-based research methods. Detailed investigations into aging processes, material patina, and tactile perception could deepen understanding of how materials communicate historical continuity within adapted interiors. Interdisciplinary collaboration with material science and conservation technology could support the development of design strategies that balance preservation, performance, and sustainability.

Further research is also needed to elaborate evaluative criteria for interior character and thematic coherence. Developing assessment frameworks that can be applied during both design and post-occupancy phases would enhance the accountability and cultural rigor of adaptive reuse projects. Such criteria could support heritage authorities, designers, and stakeholders in making informed decisions and in articulating the cultural value of interior interventions.

Finally, future studies should explore the social reception and contemporary use of adapted cinema interiors. Investigating how users perceive, interpret, and engage with historically layered spaces would provide valuable feedback on the effectiveness of adaptive reuse strategies. This user-centered perspective could bridge the gap between scholarly interpretation and lived experience, ensuring that adaptive reuse not only preserves cultural memory but also reactivates it within contemporary urban life.

In conclusion, the discussion of results confirms that adaptive reuse of cinema interiors represents a complex and multidimensional field requiring integrated theoretical, methodological, and practical approaches. The study contributes to this field by articulating a framework that foregrounds theme and character as central instruments of interior adaptation, while also revealing key challenges and directions for future research aimed at strengthening the cultural, spatial, and experiential foundations of heritage reuse practices.

Conclusion

This paper presents the results of a two-year research period and aims to propose a possible methodology for interior design thinking and applied definitions to preserve the lost identity through the adaptive reuse of a former cinema hall.

The study demonstrates that successful adaptive reuse of a former cinema hall must be based on a multidisciplinary approach, combining archival research, reconstruction of layouts, finding the historical context, spatial logic and authentic material study and evaluation.

The importance of material analysis is great and helps identify and explain the value of surviving elements and their place in the renewed interior. It gives an image of the surviving fragments is a strong foundation for the adaptive process, strengthening memory through real materials instead of copying the past.

With precise steps, the graphics illustrate the process within the research. The results of implicated definitions form a methodology that could lead to more profound links with the history of the space, materials, structure and identity.

This approach is based on the supportive role of adaptation and the reuse of old historic structures, as a most culturally responsive practice. It gives balance and full historical integration, offering “theme —“character” balance—a framework for similar heritage sites.

This study set out to develop and substantiate an interdisciplinary methodology for the adaptive reuse of early twentieth-century cinema interiors that preserves historical identity while enabling contemporary functional, technical, and cultural use. The conducted research demonstrates that this aim has been fully achieved through the consistent integration of archival research, spatial analysis, material investigation, and conceptual interpretation within a coherent adaptive reuse framework.

The first research objective—analysis of archival architectural documentation, historical sources, and visual materials—was successfully accomplished through the reconstruction and interpretation of original plans, photographs, and documentary evidence related to the “Excelsior” cinema. This analysis enabled the recovery of the original spatial logic, functional organization, and cultural context of the interior, establishing a reliable historical foundation for subsequent design and analytical decisions.

The second objective—examination of the spatial and structural characteristics of the cinema hall—was achieved by treating the interior as a system of interconnected spaces defined by proportions, circulation, sightlines, and acoustics. The study demonstrated that these spatial parameters constitute primary carriers of heritage value, often exceeding the significance of decorative elements. This finding confirms that the preservation of spatial logic is essential for maintaining the character and experiential identity of historic cinema interiors.

The third objective—identification and assessment of surviving material layers and decorative elements—was fulfilled through detailed material analysis of plasters, finishes, and interior details. The research established that authentic material fragments function as tangible mediators of cultural memory and identity. Their integration into the adaptive reuse strategy

provided continuity between historical and contemporary layers, reinforcing the interior's narrative authenticity without resorting to imitative reconstruction.

The fourth objective—investigation of technological transformations, particularly the transition from silent to sound cinema—was addressed by situating acoustic requirements and material adaptations within their historical and cultural context. The study demonstrated that technological heritage, especially acoustics, represents an integral dimension of cinema interiors and must be incorporated into adaptive reuse strategies as a cultural value rather than treated as a purely technical constraint.

The fifth objective—synthesis of historical, spatial, and material findings into an operative adaptation model—was achieved through the conceptualization of “theme” and “character” as methodological instruments. These concepts enabled the translation of research evidence into design logic, ensuring traceability between analytical findings and proposed interior interventions. As a result, adaptive reuse is framed not as an intuitive or stylistic act, but as an evidence-based and culturally accountable process.

Finally, the sixth objective—evaluation of adaptive reuse as a culturally responsible strategy for revitalizing historic cinema interiors—was fulfilled by demonstrating how the proposed methodology supports the reactivation of public, cultural, and social functions while preserving historical identity. The case study confirms that adaptive reuse, when grounded in interdisciplinary analysis and material authenticity, offers a viable alternative to demolition or superficial renovation, particularly in historic urban contexts.

In conclusion, the research confirms that adaptive reuse of cinema-theatre interiors constitutes a complex cultural practice requiring integrated theoretical, methodological, and design-oriented approaches. By foregrounding interior space as a culturally active system and by operationalizing the concepts of theme and character, the study contributes a transferable methodological framework applicable to similar heritage sites. The results support the understanding of adaptive reuse as a sustainable and culturally responsive practice capable of ensuring continuity of identity and renewed relevance of historic interiors in contemporary urban life.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Table 1. A study of the elevation (Facades) images and conditions through the period 1970-2025



1 Frontal entrance facade
Archive picture from NAG-
Sofia



2 Frontal entrance facade
Picture from 2012



3 Frontal entrance facade 2025

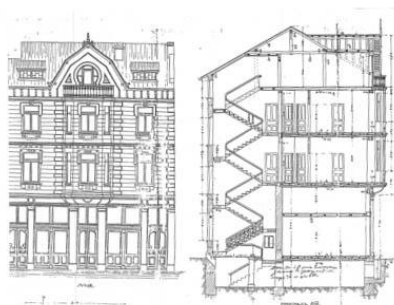


4 Side -facade-2025
(no traces from pre-existin
windows)

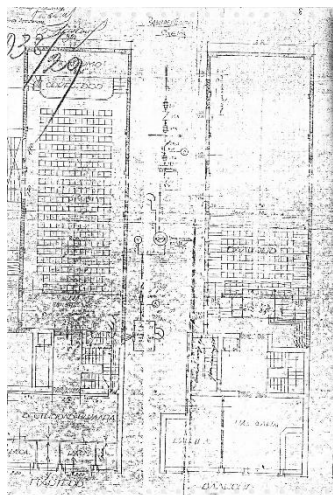


5. Side -facade-2025

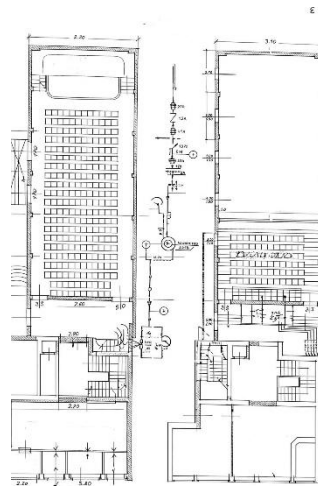
Table 2. Original and restored layouts of the cinema spaces and ground floor of the entrance level in the linked house



1. Elevation from bul. "Rockfeler". 1911. Than called "FACE"



2. Approved Original Plan-layout of level 0.00. Plan-layout of cinema balcony with electrical installation layout



3. Restored drawing of Approved Original Plan-layout of level 0.00. Restored layout of cinema balcony with electrical installation layout

Table 3. Spatial analytics of the new concept

1



The Core principal. The hall is treated as a system of interconnected spaces. The section through the hall, gives an image of:

- possible new roofing function: green roof and garden
- possible layout for the stage,
- layout for the hall
- layout for the balcony in its original capacity.

2



Design logic has to concern the front house, used as a gathering space and entrance.

Table 4. Gathering the pieces of time—surviving material analyses



1. Authentic layers of plaster
2. Authentic plaster + wallpaper
3. Decorative Gypsum board
4. Decorative ceiling plaster.

Table 5. Turning findings into an adaptation model



1. Image of interior adaptation, projecting art as a black and white photographs from artefacts from the real environment in the future interior space.



2. Image of the cinema hall, with applied authentic plaster image.



3. View from the adapted version of the stage.



Figure 1. The existing layout of the entrance level 0.00, with possible access

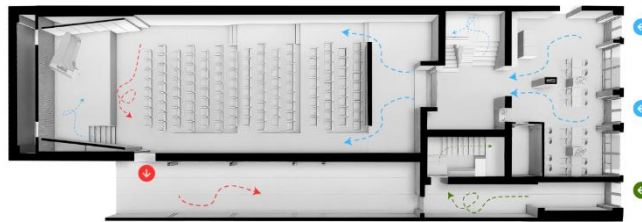


Figure 2. The adapted layout of the entrance level 0.00, with possible access

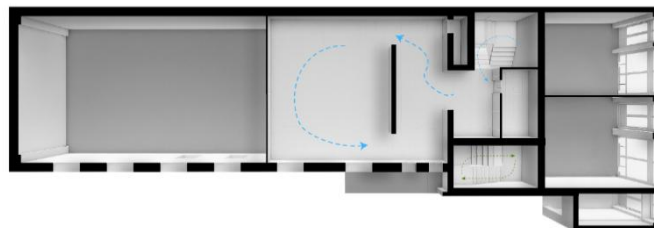


Figure 3. The existing layout of the entrance level +2.80, with possible access

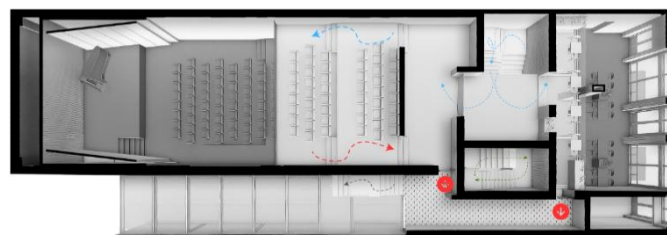


Figure 4. The adapted layout of the entrance level +2.80, with possible access