Phoenix Cinema re-born thanks to Heritage Lottery grant

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It started life as the Picturedrome in1910 and has been showing films ever since. Now known as the Phoenix, Britain's oldest continuous working cinema is to receive a complete makeover thanks to a £606,800 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

The restoration work on the East Finchley picture house will return the building to its art deco glory dating from 1938 when it was renovated and re-named the Rex. The building, which is Grade II listed, is seen as a functioning example of how cinema architectural styles have evolved over the past century. It is the only historic cinema in London to have been awarded an HLF grant.

Sue Bowers, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund Head London region, said: "This project will return a gem of a cinema to its art deco glory underlining the faithful support it has received over the years from local people as well as a glittering array of celebrities."

The building's unique qualities extend to the support it receives from a host of top British actors and filmmakers. Listed among the Phoenix's patrons are Michael Palin, Maureen Lipmann, Bill Paterson, Victoria Wood, Mike Leigh and Ken Loach.

The project will include a complete restoration of the art deco façade; repair work to the auditorium, including the original Mollo & Egan plaster wall panels and barrel-vaulted ceiling that have been damaged by damp; and the extension of the mezzanine floor above the foyer where a new café/bar will be constructed re-instating an earlier feature.

Patron, Michael Palin, said: "This is terrific news. As the years go by and the old cinemas fall by the wayside, the Phoenix has indeed lived up to its name. Now there's an exciting future ahead for one of the capital's oldest working cinemas."

Patron, Bill Paterson, said: "What a great vote of confidence in a wonderful and much loved cinema. This Phoenix will keep on rising."

For Phoenix Cinema Trust Chief Executive, Paul Homer, said: "We are thrilled to have the support of the HLF in restoring this wonderful building. The project will attract more people into the cinema and help sustain the organisation for many years to come."

The Trust now only need to raise a further £145,000 to meet their targets. To make a donation please go to www.phoenixcinema.co.uk.

In addition to the physical improvements more information will be made available on the history of the cinema including a booklet, an exhibition in the foyer and, appropriately, the creation of 20 or more short films recording people's memories and experiences of the Phoenix. The aim is to show one or two of these before each film screening and also add them to a revitalised website.

Notes to editors

The Phoenix Cinema began life as the Picturedrome in 1910. It was renamed the Coliseum in 1925. In 1938 it was remodelled, an elaborate Edwardian exterior façade was removed and an art deco style replaced it both inside and out. The cinema was renamed the Rex. The cinema has never been a bingo hall or snooker hall and continued operating throughout World War Two. It was one of the first cinemas in London to have the sound equipment to be able to show ‘talkies’ in 1929. The building was listed Grade II by English Heritage in 1998. The new restoration work is due to start in January 2010 and run for 26 weeks.