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Antiques

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A Fantasy Movie House Is Saved From Extinction

Kendall Messick, a photographer in Jersey City, has stashed a movie theater box office in the basement of his early-1900s town house. The little mid-20th-century ticket booth looks durable and sensible, with pink stuccoed walls, a clear plastic window and a metal dish for coins.

But no filmgoers actually ever lined up at the booth. Gordon Brinckle (pronounced BRINK-lee), a movie-house projectionist in Middletown, Del., built the box office for a fantasy world in his suburban basement. He called it the Shalimar, "Delaware's theater of renown."

Starting in 1959, Mr. Brinckle, who died in 2007 at 92, filled his suburban house's basement with a stage, screen, tasseled drapes, nine seats, swan and eagle statuettes, gilded sconces and a concealed speaker system. He used night lights along the stage rim as footlights, and turned pine cones into finials for a doorway.

"He repurposed common objects to create opulence," said Mr. Messick, 45, who grew up across the street from Mr. Brinckle.

This month Princeton Architectural Press is publishing Mr. Messick's book about the Shalimar (pronounced shall-i-MAHR), "The Projectionist," and Mr. Messick is organizing a traveling exhibition of Shalimar components and photographs. He spent six years documenting the dreamland, where hardly anyone set foot over the years, let alone gathered to watch movies.

"It certainly wasn't a secret, but it was a private escape in many ways," Mr. Messick said. As a child, he visited the Shalimar once, and remembers seeing Mr. Brinckle working nights at the 1920s movie house in Middletown: "He'd go up the aisle with a flashlight on his way to the projection booth."

At Christmastime in 2001, Mr. Messick and his mother visited Mr. Brinckle and his wife, Dot. The couple invited them into the Shalimar, which was decorated for the season with tinsel and crèche figures.

"The minute I saw the theater, I was like, 'That's my next project,'" said Mr. Messick, whose previous major works include a film about African-Americans' reminiscences of small-town life in North Carolina.



KENDALL MESSICK

Gordon Brinckle in the Shalimar, his secret basement movie palace, which is chronicled in a new book, "The Projectionist."

His new book covers Mr. Brinckle's 1920s childhood longings to own a theater and the decades of creating a gaudy, subterranean retreat. Mrs. Brinckle helped her husband sew and lug around materials, and the couple hosted a few curiosity seekers. Some local residents once scheduled a group tour but then canceled, perhaps dreading time alone in a basement with a rec-luse.

"They didn't know they had nothing to fear," Mr. Brinckle says with a twinkle in a half-hour biographical documentary that Mr. Messick made in 2003. In the film Mr. Brinckle complains about the typical modern movie theater, saying, "It's such a cheap-looking affair."

When Mr. Messick's cameras were rolling, Mr. Brinckle wore patterned jackets, a velvet bow tie and a bowler hat. He brought out hundreds of his sketches of floor plans and decorating schemes for imaginary theaters, which detail the drapery layers, exit-sign typefaces and the locations of sinks, furnaces and popcorn warmers. He also penciled in suggestions for innovative materials, like "spun-crome" and "nu-wood."

The Shalimar, Mr. Brinckle predicted, would be destroyed and turned into a generic family playroom after his death. "That

was heartbreaking to him," Mr. Messick said. "I felt a responsibility to somehow save it."

In 2006, under Mr. Brinckle's supervision, a Delaware company named OnTarget Fabricating/Estimating took apart the Shalimar. They had to pry out hidden screws that Mr. Messick described as "meant to withstand earthquakes."

Mr. Brinckle visited it in storage and watched the documentary. "He knew that his work was living on," Mr. Messick said.

At the Jersey City town house, the drawings are now in protective boxes. (They miraculously survived a 2006 fire that devastated the building.) A few Shalimar fragments are downstairs, with the rest in storage in Delaware awaiting reassembly for exhibitions. Mr. Messick said he had spent more than \$100,000 so far, moving and maintaining the Brinckle collection, and he plans to donate it, along with his own photos, to a museum.

He charges \$1,500 to \$6,000 each for his Shalimar prints. Book sales of "The Projectionist" will also help finance the project. Although the Brinckle family sold the house, and it has been "completely gutted and renovated as it needed to be," Mr. Messick said, "the new owners just bought a copy of the book. They're so excited."