



# ADSW PRESERVATION CASE STUDIES

## SILVER THEATRE & SILVER SPRING SHOPPING CENTER

ADSW assisted with the actions shown in *Italics*.



### **Locations:**

Silver Theatre: 8619 Colesville Road, Silver Spring, MD

Silver Spring Shopping Center: 8555 Georgia Avenue, Silver Spring, MD

**Original Names:** Silver Theatre & Silver Spring Shopping Center

**Original Year of Construction:** 1938

**Original Use:** Entertainment and Commercial

**Original Architect (1938):** John Eberson (New York)

**Restoration Years:** 1998-2004

**Restoration Architects:** Gensler Architects (theater restoration) SmithGroup Architects (new construction) RTKL (restoration & new construction)

**Current Use:** Entertainment and Commercial

*LANDMARKED AND SUPPORTED 1984-2004. WORKED WITH MONTGOMERY COUNTY ON REDEVELOPMENT PLANS.*

## DESCRIPTION

At its opening in 1938, this complex represented a milestone in commercial architecture, an early example of a suburban shopping center designed for the automobile era. It was the first shopping center designed by a nationally prominent architect, John Eberson of New York, who was already an accomplished designer of movie theaters. It was also the largest shopping center that had been built in the Washington area at that time, and it was later to become the generator of Silver Spring's post-World War II building boom that made it the "downtown of Montgomery County."

The theater, in its own right, was a stunning example of romantic, nautical, streamlined Art Deco, with its sweeping white marquee tower, horizontal brick stripes suggesting speed and motion, and its terraced chimney resembling a ship's mast at the rear of the theater - which itself was rounded like a ship. Even a mock-porthole appeared at the front corner of the building.

The interior was special, too, and was featured in theater magazines of the time. Notable at the entrance were doors of Formica with silver inlays, decorative rubber mats, ornamentation on the ceiling, and cases to promote coming attractions. The audience then proceeded into the foyer before entering the auditorium with its shelf lighting and impressive ornamentation.

These streamlined forms were continued in the shopping center, as seen in photographs from the 1970s. However, in the ensuing years, few celebrated such design elements. The owner of the Silver Spring Theatre began destruction of the theater's Art Deco marquee, tower and other ornamental features in an effort to make the building less attractive and, therefore, not worth including in a proposed Silver Spring historic district. Further demolition of the theater and the shopping center appeared to be a *fait accompli*.

## ADSW PRESERVATION

The Art Deco Society and a coalition of neighborhood groups stopped the wreckage, got the structures landmarked, and insisted on a thoughtful plan for the rehabilitation of downtown Silver Spring. It took years, and costs exceeded projections. Finally, in 2003, through the perseverance of ADSW and others, the Silver Theatre reopened as the authentically refurbished AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural Center, while, in 2004, the Silver Spring Shopping Center was renovated to serve as the centerpiece of a revitalized downtown Silver Spring.

ADSW's successful preservation efforts are commemorated in a plaque outside the Silver Theatre, which reads:

***“In 1938...the Silver Theatre became an integral and treasured part of the region’s collective cultural experience. By the 1970s, downtown Silver Spring began to fall behind...with the expansion of metropolitan Washington. In 1984, the battle to preserve the Silver Theatre and Silver Spring Shopping Center was launched by the Art Deco Society of Washington with the support of many neighborhood and civic organizations...“Silver Spring’s new downtown center reflects a strong public/private effort to preserve the past as a gift to the future...”***