Cinemas in Riga in the Interwar Period – a Mirror Reflecting Modernism and Art Déco Architecture

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For a long time Riga, a city of intense cultural ties between Western Europe and Russia, has been a place where famous European actors and soloists performed and where music and theatre shaped a prominent cultural ambiance. In the 19th century, from 1837 to 1839, Riga was a city of inspiration for German composer Wilhelm Richard Wagner, who was still young then. When he was sailing from Riga to London, he began to write a libretto for the opera "Rienzi" and drew inspiration for the "The Flying Dutchman". It is not unusual that cinema, the most powerful medium of the modern era¹ at the beginning of the twentieth century throughout Europe, was also up to date in Latvia. Films that had recently been released and were popular in Europe were consistently and regularly shown on the screens of Riga's cinemas, as well as throughout the entire new Latvian state. Among numerous other titles there also was "Das Lied einer Nacht" (1932) with Polish tenor Jan Kiepura, a favorite in Latvia as well.

In general, films were shown in the original language, German, without synchronized translation in Latvian, because most Rigans communicated in three languages: Latvian, German and Russian. It was Riga where a representative of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (USA) to the Baltic States was based since the mid-1930s. The American film company was represented by Mr Robert T. Baker, and his headquarters were on Elizabetes iela, where the *Forum* film screening

1. Wood, Ghislaine. *Art Deco and Hollywood film.* [in:] *Art Deco 1910 - 1939*, Benton Charlotte; Benton Tim; Wood Ghislaine (eds.), London: V&A Publications, 2003, p. 325.

hall was also located.² As an exclusive art and at the same time accessible to every citizen in the time period between the world wars, cinema became a necessity for practically everyone.

Cinema and films – it became necessary for just about everyone in the time between the wars. Polish Pola Negri and film director Sergei Eisenstein (*Sergejs Eizenšteins*) from Riga are global stars of a bygone era. About the film director as "a typical representative of the radical avantgarde" with an imagination and talent for scenography, wrote Professor Zdzisława Tołłoczko from Poland: "In some paintings by Sergei Eisenstein, you can easily find traces of the Wagnerian concept of opera as a musical drama".³ In this era, which only lasted for 60 years, a specific type of theatre was built – the movie theatre or "cinematograph", as it was then called in Riga, or "electro-theatre" in some provincial towns.

According to statistical data, a resident of Latvia went to the cinema four times a year, whereas a resident of Riga went there 12 times a year.⁴ 43 cinemas were available for the 385,063 inhabitants of Riga in the 1930s.⁵ After

Banga, Vita. Forums - Soldaten Kino - Komjaunietis - Pionieris - Oskars. "Kino Raksti", 2002, No 8, pp. 151-155; Freimane Valentīna. Ardievu, Atlantīda! Rīga: Atēna, 2010, p. 140.
 Tołłoczko, Zdzisława. Architektura i film czyli o mniej znanym ojcu

 Tołłoczko, Zdzisława. Architektura i film czyli o mniej znanym ojcu słynnego reżysera i teoretyka kina (architekt Michail Eisenstein 1867-1920), "Hybryda", Pismo Artystyczno-Literackie Stowarzyszenia Twórczego POLART, No. 10/2007, p. 32.

4. Beika, Aivars; Apine, Rita; Balevica, Lida. 20. gadsimta Latvijas vēsture. 2. dala. Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds. 2003. p. 808.

2.daļa. Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2003, p. 808.
5. Skujenieks, Marģers. *Latvijas statistikas atlass (Atlas statistique de la Lettonie)*. Rīga: Valsts statistiskā pārvalde, 1938., p. 3.

1. Sergejs Antonovs, movie theatre Renesanse (after 1945 – Sarkanā Ausma) in Riga. 1938. Photo by R. Čaupale, 2012 2. Sergejs Antonovs, the project of the movie theatre Renesanse. 1938. Latvian State Historical Archives, Fund 2761, Description 3, Vol. 7499







3. Teodors Hermanovskis, movie theatre Daile in Riga. 1936-1937. Photo by R. Čaupale, 2008

the war, in 1952, only twenty-four cinemas remained (and in 1987, there were 22 cinemas left⁶). At the same time it was a favourite business and almost everyone who had a room applied for a permit to start a cinematograph. For example, in Riga, five or six theatres were in operation within a walking distance of a couple of kilometres. At Lielā Nometņu iela 31, 44 and 62, three movie theatres called respectively Renesanse, Film Palace and Stars had to coexist. To keep up with the city's "cinemafication", small buildings were sometimes rebuilt into cinemas or only the first two floors of an apartment house were rebuilt. For example, at Kalnciema iela 32, a section of a five-storey apartment building was rebuilt for the movie theatre Mona so that it had a hall with a balcony.7 Such an intensification of cinematograph made cinema owners react, sometimes by making categorical requests to the city authorities not to allow new competitors to open cinemas nearby.8

Cinemas of the twenties and the thirties and the art of moving images together with the play of light and black-and-white heroes are not the only foundations of the cinematograph as it is nowadays, but they tell a delightful tale about modernist architecture, which created a type of cinema buildings in Riga which could not fail to be noticed and which "one could walk into barefoot or wearing a hat". While elsewhere in Riga building objects were conservative, cinema buildings acquired rather bold shapes, shying away

from neither Art Deco nor American Art Deco of the 1930s – Streamline Moderne. Cinemas took more avant-garde shapes in comparison with the general and a lot more moderate trend of modernism in Riga. This logically resulted from the specific nature of cinema itself and from Art Deco, which, inter alia, was also known as Hollywood style. Notable cinemas buildings include the Tuschinski Theater in Amsterdam (1921, Hijman Louis de Jong), the Kino Universum in Berlin (1931, Erich Mendelsohn), the expressive reconstruction of Gaumont-Palace in Paris (1931, Henri Belloc) and other enchanting examples across the world. Riga enjoyed cinematography in small rooms with such evocative names the Splendid Palace, the Palladium and the Grand Kino, which, unfortunately, only live on in some people`s memories.

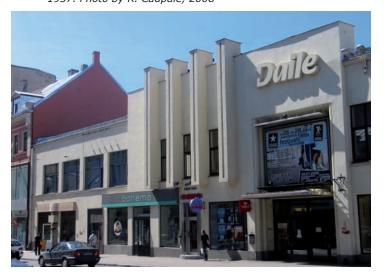
In search of originality and modernity, the picture palaces reflect so much decorative and technical innovation where Art Deco "is inextricably linked with unprecedented development of communication and connectivity, and the transmission of information". The building of the movie theatre Renesanse (Lielā Nometņu iela 44) designed in 1938 by Sergejs Antonovs, architect and professor at the Faculty of Architecture, a unique example of Riga cinemas architecture, illustrates this very well. The avant-garde decorativeness manifests itself like a large toy that has entered into the rhythm of the quiet street – the building, which looks like a broadcast radio receiver with a tuning dial

Rīga: enciklopēdija (ed.) Jērāns Pēteris. Rīga: Galvenā enciklopēdiju redakcija, 1988, p. 357.
 K/t "Mona, Kalnciema iela 32: Latvian State Historical Archives,

 K/t "Mona, Kalnciema iela 32: Latvian State Historical Archives Fund 6343, Description 8, Vol. 303.

8. Letter from the owner of the cinema "Film Palace" Voldemara Hāze to Department of Construction of Riga: Latvian State Historical Archives, Fund 2761, Description 3, Vol. 4499, p. 133.

4. Teodors Hermanovskis, movie theatre Daile in Riga. 1936-1937. Photo by R. Čaupale, 2008



5. Andrew Mather, Odeon Cinema in Brighton. 1937. Patricia Bayer, Art Deco architecture, op. cit., p. 161



^{9.} Benton, Tim. *Art Deco Architecture*. [in:] *Art Deco 1910–1939*, op.cit., pp. 257-259.

^{10.} Tołłoczko, Zdzisława i Tomasz. *W kręgu architektury Art Déco*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Oddziału PAN w Krakowie, 1997, p. 13.



6. Jānis Blaus, Liesma Cinema in Riga. 1934. Photograph from the 1970s. Vita Banga, Kinoteātri – sektantu mājvieta, in: Latvijas Arhitektūra, 2009, No 81, p. 100

and "bakelite" knobs, nowadays reminds of the beginning of the radio era. Although the shape of the building with the prominently displayed horizontal approach illustrates the beginning of the functionalism era, at the same time it is also a peculiar example of Latvian architectural metaphor of the Art Deco period.

The influence of Art Deco also extends indoors, into the hall; however, after the war a significant change was made - a three-colour veneer. The original stage opening remains behind the new wide screen together with what remains of the stage portal of the thirties. The portal of the stage is surrounded by the broad frame with its decoration according to Art Deco aesthetics: on what remains of the portal, the original contrasting colours are clearly visible - a bright orange and two quiet hues of green. A small piece of orange cloth was also kept on the back wall of the stage. The configuration of the stage portal includes a recessed concave surface in bright orange, which was emphasized by lighting fixtures concealed under the green rim of the angular stage portal. A lighting system characteristic of Art Deco was also installed in the hall: the ceiling had discreet lighting concealed at the top, hidden above the cornice and the rectangular openings on the balcony. In the early thirties, the building housing what used to be the cinematography Renesanse was located among low, though rural, wooden buildings. Expecting the heyday of this street, owing to the talent of architect Antonovs, the building gained a representative look suitable for a modern city. In the context of Art Deco and referring to Nikolaus Pevsner, Antonovs's Renesanse was a "result of a careful study of function and a genuinely artistic imagination".11

Of course, the architecture of Riga's picture palaces had some local outlines but included shapes and patterns seen all across Europe and the world. The flowing shapes in the silhouette of the streets, expressive cornices and multiple entrances with repeated compositions, wall-screens, a site for photos and film advertisements – all these constituted the presence of the cinematograph in the thirties.

In the centre of Riga, a characteristic example of these years is the movie theatre *Daile* (1936-1937) that was built according to the design of Teodors Hermanovskis. The talented T. Hermanovskis, who was an engineer by training, designed boldly and dynamically, just like Mikhail Eisenstein (*Mihails Eizenšteins*), famous master of Riga's Art Nouveau architecture. When admiring their work, it is easy to forget that neither of them had a degree in architecture.

The project of the Daile is a synthesis of principles of functionalism and flowing forms characteristic for Streamline Moderne, creating a balancing accent at the intersection on the corner of streets Krišjāņa Barona iela and Lāčplēša iela. The black-and-white photograph dating back to 1937 in the newspaper "Brīvā Zeme" allows you to identify the façade of the building as another example from those days: the contemporary Jūrmala restaurant-boîte de nuit "Mascotte" (1937, Alfrēds Karss and Kurts Betge), which was designed in two colour tones - light plaster on the walls on the ground floor and dark red plastered brickwork on the first floor. The façade facing at Krišjāņa Barona iela is decorated with powerfully articulated pilaster strips, whose vertical rhythm counterpoises a linear series of porthole windows. Hermanovskis was not afraid of incorporating topical architectural solutions into the environment of Eclecticism buildings and he successfully made use of the location of the building. The moderately streamlined shapes of T. Hermanovskis's building form a composition characteristic of the 1930s; a similar Streamline solution can be seen, for example, in the laboratory building of the Rolling Mill Company (1937) in the State of Ohio (USA). Meanwhile, the dynamic corner with the circular porthole windows of the Daile building is associated with the same accent on the corner of the Senator Hotel building (no longer exists) in Miami, USA (1939, Lawrence Murray Dixon), considered a gem of Miami Deco style.12

Principles of Art Deco aesthetics are also included in the front elevation, where powerful pilaster strips together with the advertising area and input form a composition similar to that of buildings of this type in Europe. Such an example is the Odeon Cinema (1937, Andrew Mather) in Brighton, part of the Oscar Deutsch Odeon Cinemas network, in which the rectangular and square shapes are predominant, which, while it was possible, were Willem Marinus Dudok inspired. ¹³ When comparing the primary plan of the cinema with the project that was implemented, it is apparent that the advertising area on the Daile has been reduced, leaving space for the relief of the name of the movie theatre, which resulted in more harmonious proportions.

The movie theatre Daile, which was designed by Teodors Hermanovskis, can be characterized as both dynamic functionalism and late Mendelsohn, and it can be linked to Art Deco in the areas where the delicate streamline with distinctive accentuated pilaster strips and porthole windows in the corners can be seen. According to Agatha Christie, porthole windows are "cleverly decorated by a modern form

13. Bayer, Patricia. Art Deco architecture. Design, Decoration and Detail from the Twenties and Thirties, London: Thames & Hudson, 2001, p. 161.

7. Rubenss Kode, the former auditorium in the movie theatre Aina in Riga. 1935. Photograph of the year 1995. Architectural Research: Apartment building with Aina cinema. AIG, op. cit., Fig. No 23



^{11.} Pevsner, Nikolaus. *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in Britain,* Cambridge, 1937, p. 105; cited by: Naylor Gillian, *Conscience and consumption: Art Deco in Britain.* [in:] *Art Deco 1910–1939*, op. cit, p. 237.

^{12.} Tołłoczko, Zdzisława; Čaupale, Renāte. Secesja i modernizm w Rydze. Pół wieku architektury łotewskiej – perlą europejskiego dziedzictwa kulturowego (Secession and modernism in Riga. Half of the century of Latvian architecture – the jewel of European cultural heritage). Cz. 2, Niepodległość i nowoczesność: glossarium do problemów tradycji i awangardy w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym. [in:] "Czasopismo Techniczne", z. 7-A/2008, p. 60.





8, 9. Pāvils Dreijmanis, the movie theatre Palladium's auditorium in Riga. 1925. Photograph from archive of Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation

to resemble a ship's cabin de luxe". 14 Porthole windows, which in Polish publications occasionally have been said to be typical of the Ship style, or Style of Ships, (styl okrętów, styl okrętowy)15, were a favourite decorative highlight in many Hermanovskis's projects. However, if one takes into consideration the publications published nowadays16 and analyses the observations of art historian Vita Banga, 17 the design of the movies theatre Daile, was made in accordance with the aesthetics of the Folkloristic Art Deco, as it incorporates elements of folklore combined with a rational form of functionalism, as well as such intense colours as green, orange and blue.

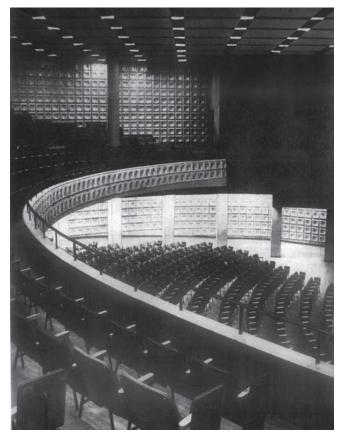
The gentle streamlined shape and the underlined crowning cornices highlight the building of the movie theatre

14. Christie, Agatha. *Three Act Tragedy*. London: Harper Collins, 2006,

. 15. Leśniakowska, Marta. Architektura w Warszawie. Lata 1918-1939.

13. Lesiliakowska, Piata. Architektūra w waiszawie. Lata 1910-1939 Warszawa: Kanon, 2002, p. 143. 16. "Сегодня Вечером". 1936, No. 292, p. 2. 17. Banga, Vita. 20.-30. gadu interjeri Rīgā. [in:] Rīgas arhitektūra: stili, ēkas, interjeri XXI gadsimtā, Lejnieks Jānis (ed.). Rīga: Jumava, 2000,

10. Ojārs Dombrovskis, the Palladium's modernized auditorium, 1965. Rīga, Photo album, compiler Zigfrīds Vanadziņš, photographer Leons Balodis, Rīga: Liesma, 1971, Fig. 88



Liesma at Vienības gatve 30 (1934, Jānis Blaus), which was built outside the Riga city centre in Pārdaugava, a quiet, lowrise part of the city. The plan of the building is very simple and also irregular due to the asymmetrical configuration of the plot of land. However, architect J. Blaus enriched the architectural forms with minimal means, and nowadays a perfect proportion and rhythm of architectural forms can be seen. The streamline had a peculiar local interpretation - it is mild, as if afraid to move. It was a compromise for the viewer between the very cubist and rational form of functionalism of Le Corbusier and at the same time a Streamline Moderne manifestation of modernity and comfort.

Although Riga was a small city, it was capable of contrasts. For example, a gem in the Art Deco style - the auditorium of the picture palace Palladium (1925, Pāvils Dreijmanis) - is the conceptual opposite of the Splendid Palace (1923, Fridrihs Skujiņš), which is a clear example of "Historicism in the form of hyperbolic Rococo" 18 and is also the first purpose-built cinema building in Riga.¹⁹ However, it should be noted that this twentieth century's Neo-Rococo example in the interior was an exception in Riga. For cinemas interior design as the best were used modern elements - Modernism and the different varieties of Art Deco architecture. Hollywood, which also benefited from European solutions, is a symbol not only for American cinema. Many ideas of art and design, what borne in walls of this Mecca of the Movies, also spoke in Europe and served as prototype for cinemas. The famous auditorium of the New Victoria Cinema (1930, Ernest Wamsley Lewis, William Edward Trent) in London could also be included among the many examples of the Art Deco era. Such an inspiring example in Latvia can be seen in photographs in a 1952 brochure²⁰ in which zigzag star motif or the popular Art Deco theme - the sunburst motif have contributed in the same way to the decoration of the ceiling and shapes of the lights in the Forum (1923, Indrikis Devendruss; 1932, Levs Vitlins) and the Grand Kino (rebuilt in 1931, Fridrihs Skujiņš) in Riga. A similar aesthetics of the sunburst motif was also present on the ceiling of the Kino Gwiazda (1939, Joseph Langiewicz) in Gdynia, Poland.

Also, in the hall of the movie theatre Aina (1933-1935, Alfrēds Karrs, Kurts Betge) at Vaļņu iela 19, the hall was furnished as a cinema rather than as a retail premises (as an annex to the main building in the backyard), which was the original plan; the shape and layout of the lighting fixtures created another stylistic effect of Art Deco architecture. The hall is covered by a vault, which together with the lighting system forms a composition layout that is analogous to the

18. Krastiņš, Jānis. Rīgas arhitektūras meistari, 1850-1940. (The masters

20. 24 кинотеатра города Риги. Рига: Министерство кинематографии Латв.ССР, 1952, pp. 14, 19.

of architecture of Riga), Rīga: Jumava, 2002, p. 274. 19. Three years later in 1926 after project of Fr. Skujiņš in similar stylistic as "Splendid Palace" in Tallinn there was built "Gloria Palace" cinema, which was recognized as most effective example of foreign architect in Estonia: Kalm Mart, The Middle-class World takes shape - architecture of the 1920s. [in:] Eesti kunsti ajalugu "History of Estonian art", 1900 – 1940, Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2010, pp. 285, 668.





11. Vladimirs Šervinskis, Film Palace (after 1945 – Oktobris) in Riga. 1934. Photograph ca. 1930s. Jānis Siliņš, Latvijas māksla: 1915-1940, III sēj., Stokholma 1993, p. 266

12. Thomas R. Somerford, Edward Albert Stone, Odeon Cinema, Leicester Square, London 1937. Patricia Bayer, Art Deco architecture, op. cit, p. 145

Auditorium Building in Chicago (1887-1889, Louis H. Sullivan, Dankmar Adler).

The owners of the six-storey apartment building only after the end of construction in 1935 decided to have a cinematograph. Meanwhile in 1995, through research carried out at the building at Valnu iela 19 by the Architectural Research Group (Arhitektoniskās Izpētes grupa, AIG) including the hall of the movie theatre Aina with 547 seats, architect Andis Špaks evaluated the vaulted hall engineered by Rubenss Kode as a unique example of construction of 1930's Latvia.21 The technical solution chosen for the loadbearing construction of the hall ceiling is curved reinforced concrete frames that on one end are based on the ground floor ceiling beam consoles of the six-storey building. In accordance with the project design, the thickness of the walls/ceiling is 51 cm and they have been constructed as a filler between the frames and are self-supporting.²² The spectacular result of this construction was that each plug is connected with a light and creates a entirely new spatial environment.

However, the auditorium of the Palladium (1925) was lavishly decorated in the Art Deco style by architect Pāvils Dreijmanis, a promoter of Art Deco style in Latvia. There are only a few old photographs documenting this time and in which components of the Hollywood style can be seen, from exotic birds to floral motifs, from African masks and sorcerers of the Incas to girls born from Egyptian lotus flowers. The discreetly concealed lighting, the zigzag lines that dominate on the pilasters and on *boiserie*, and the shapes of the ceiling lighting all demonstrate the jovial nature of Art Deco. Unfortunately, Palladium, which was fully consistent with the best patterns of American Art Deco in Riga, was completely destroyed during World War II.

The new interior of the Palladium Cinema with perforated aluminium panelling and plaster that also improves

the acoustics was designed by architect Ojārs Dombrovskis in 1965 and created a contemporary technical ambiance of the sixties and seventies. The 1960s interior of Palladium was conceptually related to that of the 1930s, when cars and boats served inspired architecture.

A specific motif of towers was used in the movie theatre Film Palace (1934, Vladimirs Šervinskis) with asymmetrical façades as an accent, the vertical ascent visually intensified by means of narrow longitudinal openings for windows. Composition wise, theatres in Western Europe and many movie theatres of the British chain Odeon Cinemas were also designed in the same manner, for example, Odeon (1937, Edward Albert Stone & Thomas R. Someford) in London on Leicester Square. When analyzing the façade of Film Palace, it should be noted that the recently approved façade design project comprises multiple entrances, above there is a row of five windows, but such decorative elements of Art Deco as stepped archways are not present. However, these can be seen in illustration in the research about Latvian art by art historian Jānis Siliņš.23 The façade with stepped archways is also visible in a photograph in advertisement published in 1952.24

At this height, the façade was not plastered – its brick masonry roughness was retained. Over time, the aesthetic qualities of the image of the Film Palace building have changed. It is likely that after a reconstruction in the late 1950's, the cinema was renamed Oktobris, grainy plaster was applied to its façade, and a decorative border was added around the second floor windows of the façade. On the front side and on the backside of the building, film advertising and information stands were placed as a unifying element to match the expressive cornice above the entrance. The wooden elements of the glass cases were highlighted in a contrasting yellow oil paint.

Just like in the 1950s the overall design continued throughout the years, remodelling the Renesanse, Film Palace and other movie theatres, cinemas and halls involved stylistic touches from the pre-war years that did not result in substantial changes to the architects original concept. Thus in the early 1960s, the influence of the pre-war years could still be felt, for example, in cinema Zvaigzne (1960) which is located in Rēzekne City, the Latgale Region and which was built in accordance with a serial project that might have been sent from Moscow.²⁵ Construction of public buildings was rationed in the Soviet occupation period, and in 1959 were built in Rēzekne with the asymmetry characteristic of the time period and in accordance with a standardized design.²⁶

Generating their own architectural forms, Dreijmanis, Hermanovskis, Antonovs and other architects reached for

24. *24 кинотеатра,* op. cit., p. 51.

25. Rēzekne Construction Board Archive, Vol. No. 01947.

13. Vladimirs Šervinskis, Oktobris's (Film Palace, 1934) film advertising and information stands, ca. 1961. Photo from author's archive



^{21.} Buševica Anda, *Pasaules vērojumi iekārtojas Ainā, "*Diena", 19.09.2001, (No. 220/3138), p. 13.

^{22.} Architectural Research: Apartment building with Aina cinema. AIG (Arhitektoniskās izpētes grupa), Vol. No. 0198, author: Andris Špaks, Rīga, 1995.

^{23.} Siliņš Jānis, *Latvijas māksla. 1915-1940. III*, Stokholma: Daugava, 1993, p. 266.

^{26.} Driba, Dzintars; Zakamennijs, Olegs. *Kultūras nami, klubi un kinoteātri,* [in:] Laikmetīgā arhitektūra Padomju Latvijā (Современная архитектура в Советской Латвии), Rīga: Liesma, 1966, pp. 37-41.



14. Kino Zvaigzne in Rēzekne. 1960. Latgale Culture and History Museum, sygn. LgKM 8870

the ending of the movie theatre era. The design for the Kinoteātris Baldone developed by architect Uģis Šēnbergs was as Last Mohican between the golden age of the cinema, when Art Deco lent its brilliance and colour, and the reign of television, which in turn was superseded by the Internet. The cinema building in Baldone accumulated aesthetic features and shapes that originated in postmodernism and Art Deco, particularly in its expressive entrance, which is an example of original and unconventional thinking in the romantic architecture of theatres in Latvia, architecture, which has been lost.

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different sources of functionalism, folklore and Art Deco in Europe and the USA by identifying the artistic spirit of the interwar years. The architectural value of the building is based on individual rather than serial projects and on the specificity of style and local traditions. From 1980 to 1987, at the end of the Soviet republic period, a recreational complex with a theatre hall and an exhibition hall was built near Riga in the Baldone²⁷ municipality as a gesture commemorating

27. *Jaunie arhitektūrā*. [in:] *Latvijas Arhitektūra*, Rīga: Latvijas Arhitektu savienība, 1989, p.76.

15. Uģis Šēnbergs, the main elevation of recreational complex with a cinema hall Kinoteātris Baldone in Baldone. 1987. Photograph of the year 1987. http://www.senbergs.lv/lat/projects/index.php?1144&gallery&pos=3



16, 17. Uģis Šēnbergs, the main and west elevation of Kinoteātris Baldone. Photo by R. Čaupale, 2012



