



Is it a bar? Is it a plane? No - it's the Everyman

In this companion piece to his article on luxury cinema, published in the previous issue of Cinema Technology, where the CEO of The Everyman Group talked about his philosophy towards cinema, Mark Trompeteler visited the major refit of a small North London cinema, to see how that philosophy is transferring into practice.



Last December, I visited the former small "Screen on the Hill" cinema in Belsize Park, North London, on its last night before its major refit into an Everyman cinema.

Belsize Park ... before

As one of the small chain of "Screen" cinemas, operated by the former company Mainline, it had all the expected features, appearance and operational aspects of a conventional cinema. Its single screen auditorium and foyer did hark back to the concept of cinema as a building that we have been shared for some one hundred years. Its typical street frontage had the traditional cinema illuminated large letter signage

advertising current films, and a high neon cinema sign which could be seen some distance away (right), clearly identified it to pedestrians and passing traffic as a traditional cinema on a high street.

On entering the cinema through conventional cinema doors you entered a foyer with a box office desk first, and then the concessions and refreshments counters. The takeover of the cinema by the Everyman group had already had quite an impact on the increased up market nature of refreshments. Coffees, wines and other alcoholic drinks were available and there was a small stand up lobby area where customers could stand and have a drink.



During the time I visited some forty to fifty people had turned up for the last screening prior to the refit. Every one seemed to be buying glasses of wine, hot and soft drinks and foodstuff. About fifty per cent seemed to have pre booked and

some obviously knew the staff from previous visits and gave the appearance of being regulars. The admission charge was £9.50 with a charge of £7 for concessions and children.

The auditorium contained 243 traditional cinema numbered tip up seats with drink cup holders. The projection box featured a Westar 35mm. projector with platter and a Christie 2000 2K digital projector. Sound was delivered through Dolby DA20 & CP65 sound processors. The projectionist on duty that night, Karl, talked about the forthcoming refit. He also talked about the fact that he worked at Belsize Park on a rota basis with two other projectionists and that they could be called upon to work at any other cinemas in the chain.

The New Kid on the Block - First Impressions

On returning two months later, and after the refit, I could not believe the transformation that had taken place, and how it so closely fitted the philosophy this new chain of cinemas had outlined in the earlier article I had written about the Everyman group.

The most immediate and striking feature was how unlike the look of a conventional cinema



Before - the 'old' Screen-on-the-Hill ... projection box, foyer and auditorium



on a high street the new venue now appeared. It had the typical look of modern contemporary shop, or salon or wine bar on a high street, with the new Everyman logo clearly identifying the venue. Advertising of forthcoming films was achieved using two large flat plasma screens in the venue windows. I have to say the exterior appearance of the venue was not like the exterior of any cinema I had ever seen before. I noticed that the new frontage would not immediately strike passers by that this was a cinema venue, but then I reflected back on the philosophies in the accompanying article and also on the fact that with Everyman cinemas there is a trend towards having the majority of guests pre-book in advance.

On entering the new venue immediately on the left hand side was the concierge desk where the philosophy is that it is a one stop point for all or any queries, and operations, as well as a greeting point. Everyman cinemas are happy for you to go straight through to the screening lounge with your advance ticket, so you could if you prefer do that, and completely bypass the concierge. Behind the concierge desk the previous familiar small cinema foyer now took in all the look and function of a very smart wine/coffee bar with stools, armchairs, other types of chair and small tables where you can sit relax and enjoy refreshments. Clearly this could operate independently of the screening lounge as a wine and coffee bar.





The Screening Lounge

On entering the screening lounge former patrons would be greeted by a truly impressive transformation of the former auditorium. The former 243 seats were now reduced down to 129 seats. The majority of the seats were either single or double leather sofa or armchair seats. Especially designed and manufactured for the Everyman Group in Barcelona by Figueras International the seating signified luxury. All seats came with wine coolers and individual fold away tables for refreshments. These seats all had mechanical push button reclining mechanisms. The guest ticket price for these seats is £12.

At the rear of the screening lounge were a small number of super luxury leather seats in a lighter grey colour – with similar individual facilities, more spacious and with electrically operated reclining mechanisms – and leg and foot rests incorporated. They are the most luxurious cinema seats I had ever seen to date. The guest ticket price for these seats is sixteen pounds.

Guests on entering the screening lounge will be served if required by one of three lounge servers all equipped with the type of server's PDA tablets where refreshment orders can be recorded, transmitted and priced up prior to delivery to the customer in situ, as in the noodle bar chain "Wagamama". Foods and snacks capable of being served to seats now include hot snacks cooked in a microwave. You might excuse the observation that the whole area gave the feel of a really generously spaced and equipped first class aircraft cabin with in-flight movie capabilities that are truly superb. There is also a new small bar at the rear of the screening lounge that serves drinks during trailers and adverts but ceases serving once the film starts.

On the technical side, the screening lounge has had significant improvements made to its acoustics and surround quality by the lowering of the entire ceiling, and an increase in both the number and quality of surround and rear speakers. Comfort improvements also extend to a complete refurbishment of the toilets.

Projectionists and Change

The difference from the former venue I think is staggering. Hopefully my before and after pictures show this more clearly. One of the significant issues talked about in my companion article is that of the future of film projection. The refit included the removal of the 35mm Westar projector leaving only the single Digital Christie remaining. More significant is the fact that the former projectionists have been redeployed to elsewhere in the company and that projection is carried out by multi skilled venue staff – after a short period of training. The projection box also now doubles as the venue manager's office.

The Everyman Effect

In an early successful piece of programming the venue had recently screened an early preview performance of "Frost / Nixon", quite a few weeks before its national release. The venue

used its new satellite equipment to follow the screening with a live question and answer session with the film's writer Peter Morgan, lead actor Martin Sheen and film critic Jason Solomons. The event was sold out and typical of the type of quality event cinema programming that The Everyman Group is developing.

During my afternoon visit, passers by and other visitors who made a specifically planned visit to make enquiries or bookings, or just to look around, were being shown around by venue staff. Visitors appeared to me to be very curious – one woman telling me that it looked like a hair dressing salon at first, another that it was a wine bar, and another enquiring what had happened to the old cinema? One gentleman told me he thought the screening lounge gave the feel of a plush Hollywood studio preview theatre, the type you see in the movies where the director and producer meet to view the rushes and the final edit of a movie.

One of the compelling advantages of digital presentation over that of film is that the patron in the cinema can view an image on the screen, and hear the soundtrack, in a quality that almost replicates exactly the kind of quality the director and producer wanted and approved when they viewed it in their luxurious production facility based preview theatre. Also that the standard of quality is more easily maintained across world wide distribution and however many times the digital file is screened through projectors.

In addition, at the Everyman Belsize Park, people will be watching films in comfort levels that will probably easily match or surpass that of any director and any producer viewing a film in any of their preview theatres. From now on at Belsize Park all cinemagoers will feel what it is like to be a movie VIP.

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