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Entertainment

Oscars 2010: Movie Theaters Go Green

Lori Johnston, 03.05.10, 3:20 PM ET

Coming soon to more movie theaters (and maybe to a theater near you): buttery popcorn in eco-friendly bags, recycled 3-D glasses and buildings topped with solar panels.

Some theaters are making an effort to help viewers go green at the movies, including Georgia-based Carmike Cinemas. It built a LEED-certified theater in Chattanooga, Tenn., which opened in November. (LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design and is a green-building rating standard.)

Environmentally conscious theater construction and design are growing trends, according to the Washington, D.C.-based National Association of Theatre Owners, which represents more than 29,000 movie screens in the U.S. Some theaters are installing solar panels to save energy--resulting in lower energy bills--and using recycled building materials for new theaters and existing facilities that are under renovation.

"I think there's lots of indication in the marketplace that there's an appreciation of [green measures]," says Leslie Hoffman, executive director of the New York-based Earth Pledge, a nonprofit organization. "It's no longer considered fringy or weird or a negative, which at one point it was. You thought the place was cheap or not up to snuff, or green was somehow subpar."

Livermore Cinemas in Livermore, Calif., near San Jose, boasts the largest solar-powered theater in the country.

Carmike Cinemas' 12-screen Tennessee theater, called The Majestic, has 2,500 seats, twice the size of the previous theater on the site, according to the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*. The LEED Silver requirements will be met by using recycled building materials and by a storm-water recycling system.

Dale Hurst, director of marketing for Carmike Cinemas, which has 247 theaters and 2,285 screens in 35 states, says being environmentally conscious is becoming more important to viewers. The company runs theaters in small- to mid-sized communities with fewer than 100,000 people and hopes that its first green theater will be a role model.

"In new construction you've got this blank slate," Hoffman says. "We're almost, I think, at the tipping point where anybody building anything is thinking about green building."

The National Association of Theatre Owners has joined with the Inter-Society for the Enhancement of Cinema Presentation to address environmental issues. An early effort developed a comprehensive trailer recycling program in which theaters can include trailers with their feature-length film pickups.

Another recycling effort you may see, especially with the increase in 3-D movies, is glasses-recycling in theater lobbies. California-based RealD joined with the association and others to kick off the pilot 3-D glasses recycling program in July 2008 with the movie *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. It expanded the pilot with the opening of Bolt in November 2008. The theater association and Coca-Cola are also working on the development of a plastic bottle recycling program.

The committee also is working to:

--develop a visual record of recycling of film trailers and 3-D glasses

--promote green building and construction sites

--tally how the industry is reducing its environmental footprint by converting heating, ventilation and air conditioning (known as HVAC) systems, incorporating solar paneling and low-flow restroom features, creating recycling programs and using green cleaning products.

Hoffman of Earth Pledge says another way theater companies can focus on being green is by selecting programming that addresses these topics, noting that there's a growing small film industry around these issues.

"The civic and social mindset is very much more aligned with the need to protect the environment," she says.

Lori Johnston is a regular contributor to the Mother Nature Network.

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