

Abstract for Moving Pictures: Reusing Cinemas as Places of Worship in the Diaspora

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This project employed cross-disciplinary methods to examine the growing practice of reusing cinemas as places of worship. The project comprised two strands: the first was a broad survey of cinemas used by faith groups in England which allowed us to construct a socio-historical overview of the practice. The aim here was to assemble an architectural history of these buildings not as they were originally but of what they became. This is important, as many of these sites have been places of worship for almost as long as they were cinemas – indeed, one gurdwara in Coventry has been a place of worship for longer than it was a cinema. In looking at the different groups who are adapting former cinemas, it was possible to read demographic and religious shifts in late-modern Britain. Through the survey and interviews, we gained insights into where different groups intersect and how migrant communities connect with one another and with homelands. The information that we gathered was used to produce a policy brief for local planning authorities and a report that was submitted as evidence for a government inquiry on protecting built heritage.

The second strand of the project was a close study of one faith group (the Zoroastrians) and how they use and relate to the former cinema that they occupy in Rayners Lane, London by employing the ‘site-integrity’ methodology. This approach actively engaged members of the congregation in the capture and analysis of their cultural heritage through a series of co-created film installations. These site-specific artworks examined the role of built heritage in shaping community identity while opening it up to a broader audience to reflect upon and appreciate the evolving nature of this shared cultural asset through a site-specific film event as part of the London Migration Film Festival.