

“Architecture in Silent Movies.”

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Many have written about the cultural and societal messages portrayed in early 20th century motion pictures. Others have considered the artistic form, innovations in cinematography, directing, acting, and storytelling in these films. While all of these are captivating aspects of movies, architectural historians find an added bonus: images of buildings, cities, landscapes and other built forms preserved and documented at a moment in time. While some scenes were filmed on a staged set, many others were filmed on location. These movies capture the people, styles, furnishings, and ideas of their time, for better or worse.

Some of the earliest films were created in the studio of inventor Thomas Edison, such as *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903. While Edison is sometimes credited with creating motion pictures by introducing the Kinetograph in 1890 and the Kinetoscope in 1891, there were actually a number of innovators working on experiments to film motion and perfect the technology. It is believed French artist and inventor Louis LePrince was the first to create a series of moving photos on film in 1888, several years before Edison. In Paris, brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière held the first commercial motion picture screening in 1895.



Scene from *The Great Train Robbery*, Edison Manufacturing Co., 1903. Source: Library of Congress, digital collection (<https://www.loc.gov/item/00694220/>).

Starting as a novelty entertainment, early motion pictures were couple minute 'shorts' of everyday life and events shown in nickelodeons. The films were called silent because they did not include audio of the dialog or the soundtrack of what was filmed, but often had subtitles and music, including musical scores that were specifically written for a film.

Locations and events that could previously only be experienced in-person, described in a book, or represented in a live stage production could now be portrayed in 'real life' and re-shown to mass audiences anywhere in the country or the world. Moving pictures made

it possible to film situations and action with the use of elaborate sets, diverse locations, and cinematic special effects, no longer limited to a written page or the time and physical constraints of a stage performance.



Scene from the film, "San Francisco earthquake and fire, April 18, 1906." Source: Library of Congress, digital collection (<https://www.loc.gov/item/00694425/>).

The demand for motion picture entertainment really took off in the 1910s and 1920s as films became longer in length and portrayed increasingly sophisticated plots, settings, and cinematography, impressing audiences and elevating the storytelling to new heights of artistic expression. Directors innovated with the new medium and pushed boundaries of what was possible with death defying stunts to surprise and amaze audiences. Comedy director/ actors such as Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton famously pushed the limits with 'thrill' movies such as *Modern Times*, *Never Weaken*, and *The General*.



Harold Lloyd in *Never Weaken* (1921). Source: GetArchive, Public Domain photograph (<https://jenikirbyhistory.getarchive.net/media/never-weaken-the-movies-come-from-america-78ed17>).

Some of the most interesting films to watch are those shot on location. In these early years of filmmaking, directors would frequently use actual places in and around the studio to film stunts, gags, and other feats, as well as scenes of everyday life. Before recording live audio was a consideration, it was easy to take the camera wherever you wanted to film around town. The 1927 release of the first major sound film, or “talkie”, *The Jazz Singer*, was the beginning of the end of the silent film era. If you are interested in early movies, both silent and talkies, the Library of Congress offers films in their online digital collections. There you can find a variety of films and subject matter, from the inauguration of President William McKinley in 1901 and the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 to a 1945 antisemitism short film featuring a young Frank Sinatra.

For those particularly interested in the crossroads of architecture, landscape, and film history, there are a number of websites and blogs devoted to finding film locations and showing how they appeared then and now. Due to the curiosity and tireless work of film enthusiasts, many sites have been meticulously identified and documented, matching and comparing images from movies to their appearance today. Amazingly, many are still recognizable, retaining buildings and other landscape features that were depicted in films more than 100 years ago!

While hundred-year-old motion pictures are not likely to make it to the “Top 10 Most Watched Today” list, if you want to join in the fun, many silent films are available to borrow at your local library or can be accessed for free on the internet as well as your favorite streaming apps. Search “silent movies,” or try popular actors of the silent film era such as Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Harold Lloyd, or Buster Keaton. Besides

discovering some fascinating historical views of cities, factories, amusement parks, neighborhoods, and everyday life, you might enjoy a new or familiar story. You can also try to find and visit some of the places that were filmed on location for a fun and unusual adventure.

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Charlie Chaplin in *Sunnyside* (1919). Source: Picryl, Public Domain photograph, J. Willis Sayre Collection of Theatrical Photographs (<https://picryl.com/media/silent-film-actor-charlie-chaplin-sayre-21131-8f9cff>).

"The End."