

# THE PLAIN DEALER

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## Revitalization, rebirth: More than good theater

### Detroit-Shoreway's Capitol redo is linchpin

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On a rainy Cleveland evening in April 1921, hundreds of people gathered at West 65th Street and Detroit Avenue to celebrate the newly built Gordon Square Arcade and its attached movie theater, the Capitol.

After a few speeches and a tune from a six-piece orchestra, the Capitol screen lit up with its debut feature film, "The Inner Voice." The female lead, actress Agnes Ayres, would lose her fortune years later in the stock-market crash. But at the moment, the silent-film world still held promise, and she was a star.

A little of that 1921 excitement might be in the air at 4:10 p.m. today as community leaders in the Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood gather inside the Capitol to celebrate a \$7 million project aimed at renovating the theater and invigorating the neighborhood.

Construction begins Thursday to turn the theater, empty for 23 years, into a three-screener specializing in independent films. It is slated to reopen in April 2009.

This marks the newest and largest investment to date in the Gordon Square Arts District.

The district is a roughly 24-block area shaping up as a Mecca for galleries, boutiques, eateries and theaters. The overall plan is to invest \$30 million in creating a streetscape along Detroit, renovating Cleveland Public Theatre and building a new home for the Near West Theatre, a community theater that reaches out to disadvantaged youths.

Jeffrey Ramsey, executive director of the Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization, says the Capitol is the cornerstone.

The hope is that 100,000 people will see movies there every year, he says. As an arts district, the neighborhood "needs an anchor, a catalyst."

The Capitol will be owned by Detroit Shoreway and operated by Cleveland Cinemas, which runs the Cedar Lee Theatre and five others.

The intellectual menu will include the occasional big Hollywood movie.

And, like the Cedar Lee, the concessions menu will include locally baked pastries, fresh sandwiches and beer.

Ramsey, Cleveland City Councilman Matt Zone and Joy Roller, executive director of the

Gordon Square Arts District, envision the Capitol as part of a little theater district that draws visitors who stay to dine and shop. They hope the cool factor will encourage brain-gainers to buy some of the area's new houses.

The Capitol is also an important nod to the past. Zone says his grandparents lived on West 65th Street. His parents dated at the Capitol.

"To see new life being breathed into that place is just reinvigorating," he said.

When the Capitol was unveiled in 1921, it boasted a single screen in a proscenium above a stage outfitted with a pipe organ -- live musical enhancement for all that silent action onscreen. There were about 800 seats on the main floor and another 400, arranged on ascending steps, in the balcony.

Bare bulbs surrounded a wagon-wheel-style light fixture that illuminated an intricately painted ceiling -- "the color scheme is old rose, ivory and gray," reported the April 9, 1921, edition of The Plain Dealer. Plaster columns and painted medallions decorated the side walls. A second-floor mezzanine had a decorative fireplace.

When talkies supplanted silent films in the 1930s, much of the wall decoration was covered in fabric to improve acoustics. But the theater played on through the war years and after, as the area boomed with families.

In the 1970s, it closed for a while, then reopened showing films from eastern Europe. In the early 1980s, the Capitol also screened movies from the Cleveland International Film Festival.

The last performance was a vaudeville show presented by Cleveland Public Theatre in 1985.

In 1997, Detroit Shoreway, which by then owned the Capitol as well as the rest of the Gordon Square Arcade, secured \$50,000 to stem decay of the theater (roof leaks had caused significant water damage), remove some of the debris and hire an architect to draw up preliminary plans for a renovated theater and street improvements along Detroit.

Those plans sat idle until recently, when the Gordon Square Arts District emerged to lead fund raising for arts investment in the neighborhood.

Of the \$7 million that the renovation is expected to cost, \$4.5 million comes by way of tax-credit equity.

In this case, investor National City Corp. recoups much of its money through federal New Market tax credits granted by the government to encourage improvements in low-income neighborhoods. Federal and state historic-district tax

credits also have been granted.

Another \$1.5 million comes as a 2 percent loan from the city of Cleveland; \$500,000 is a Cleveland Foundation grant; \$100,000 is a grant from the Finance Fund; and \$360,000 comes from a county Commercial Redevelopment Fund grant.

Marous Brothers Construction, designer-builder of the renovation, will donate \$100,000 in services.

Architect Chris Auvil, who works for Marous, said the theater has great presence.

"I love the neoclassical nature of it -- the exuberance, the digging back into historical roots. It's just a very elegant space," he said.

"Although we will not be able to restore everything, we want to respect what's there."

When the job is done, the main theater will be outfitted with 400 plush seats with cupholders. The balcony will become two 100-seat theaters.

And there won't be a hint of old-fashioned film. Cleveland Cinemas President Jonathan Forman said the Gordon will have all-digital technology. That makes for higher-quality viewing and allows the theater to show 3-D movies, live concerts by satellite and other nontraditional programs.

West Siders have long asked Forman to deliver something like the Cedar Lee a little closer to home, he said.

"I think the audience is big enough that it can support two [independent-film] theaters in two different parts of the city," he said.

Eight months before Gordon Square and the Capitol Theatre first opened back in the '20s, investors published a newspaper ad to boost enthusiasm for the project. "The Time to Pick Cherries Is When They Are Ripe!" the ad shouted in bold type.

It went on to promise that "Gordon Square will eventually be to Cleveland what Times Square is to New York City." No one speaks in such overblown terms today.

Still, Foreman was pleasantly stunned by what he saw when he started looking at the neighborhood.

"The truth is, I had no idea what was going on in that area, and holy cow!" he said.

"There is such passion and such growth and such movement."

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