

CONNECTICUT PROPERTY LINE

Theater At Center Stage

Historic Bijou Has Key Role in Bridgeport Redevelopment Project

By KATHLEEN SCHASSLER
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BRIDGEPORT -- Neon lights shine bright in downtown Bridgeport where one of the oldest movie houses in the country - the historic, but once rundown Bijou Theater - is at the heart of a \$25 million project that promises an edgy new entertainment destination for the city.

As tens of millions of dollars fuel widespread redevelopment and historic renovation downtown, which could add thousands of housing units and vital retail and restaurant space in the coming years, Bijou Square could be the area's first major redevelopment milestone since artist housing opened nearby in 2004.

The project is the kind that cities across Connecticut are encouraging, creating entertainment districts for the arts that are bolstered by housing, restaurants and office space. Such areas have the potential to not only draw visitors from the surrounding area, but also to become tourist destinations.

In Bridgeport, the historic three-story Bijou Theater on Fairfield Avenue - vacant for 10 years - is at the center of Bijou Square. Built in 1908, the Bijou is often cited as the oldest movie house in the country that was originally built as a theater and has not ever been used for anything else.

In the plans, the Bijou would continue in that tradition, showing independent films. The old theater is being connected to the Jennings building next door, where patrons will enter and buy tickets. Two smaller movie screens also are being added in the Jennings building.

Work on the project began two years ago, and the theater is expected to open within three months.

During the next couple of years, Bijou Square is expected to encompass several buildings in the surrounding area.

So far, the biggest challenge for Bijou Square "was creating sufficient interest to gather a cluster" of business "to feed off each other," said developer Philip Kuchma, president of Kuchma Corp.

Because the Bijou Theater had been closed for a decade and the Jennings building was also vacant for a dozen years, the neighborhood "was crummy and empty, even in the daytime," Kuchma said.

The movie theater will be operated by Phil Hartman, a New York-based restaurateur and owner of the Pioneer Theater, an independent movie house on East Third Avenue in New York City. Hartman has invested \$1.5 million to run the movie operation with an upscale concession bar. Hartman also will open a restaurant in the Jennings building.

"Once [Kuchma] told me he had the oldest movie theater in the U.S., I found it tempting," Hartman said. "Once I saw it, I just loved the theater. It's exciting to get involved in the city's revitalization."

Kuchma, a Bridgeport native who once served on the city council, said he wants the Park City to "embrace its differences" and be "a little edgier, bohemian, and offbeat" than other places in the state.

Kuchma also has sat on several boards, including the city's arts council, and, as a developer, is known for the conversion of a former department store into artist housing.

Kuchma's name was mentioned recently as a possible mayoral candidate in Bridgeport.

The Bijou is notable not only for its long run of showing films, but also for its Spanish Colonial Revival-style architecture and a brick façade adorned with colorful Arts and Crafts-style tile embellishments.

The Bijou's existing architectural features will be restored and accentuated, including original floor tiles inside the old main entrance - that spell out BIJOU - and a pressed tin proscenium gracefully arching above the screen in the main, 230-seat theater.

The theater also has a two-story ballroom, once known as Colonial Hall, with a wrap-around balcony on the second level. The 11,500-square-foot space - being renovated for the first time in more than 40 years - will be left largely intact with exposed structural elements for the new tenant, Antinozzi Associates, a Stratford architectural firm.

The space features ornate moldings and gilded accents, large windows, an intricate wrought-iron balcony rail - where spectators once viewed dancers below - and several original chandeliers that will continue to hang above the 6,851-square-foot ballroom-turned-office space.

The Jennings building, constructed in 1911, will contain Hartman's Two Boots Roadhouse, a pizza-Cajun-style restaurant and bar with live entertainment and outdoor dining.

The restaurant is preparing to open later this month, according to Hartman, who has 10 Two Boots pizza restaurants in Manhattan, including one at Grand Central Station, as

well as Mo Pitkin's House of Satisfaction, an East Village restaurant/bar and performance space, and the Pioneer Theater, showing alternative films since 2001.

"I sell a lot of pizza to operate the Pioneer," said Hartman, who also wants to form a nonprofit Bridgeport Film Society to work in collaboration with the Bijou.

Above Two Boots, the second level of the Jennings building will hold two smaller screens of the Bijou Theater - one seats 71, the other seats 42 - and a reception area with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Fairfield Avenue. The space is intended for screening parties and other events.

Also on the second floor is a 2,800-square-foot office already leased to an unnamed film distribution company that has offices in Manhattan and San Francisco, according to Kuchma, whose company's headquarters is on the third floor. The fourth level offers 20,536 square feet of unleased office space.

Heidi Hamilton, director of the film division of the state Commission on Culture and Tourism, said the Bijou Square project dovetails nicely with the state's push to encourage film production in the state

"Over time, we'd love to see [the Bijou] play a role in a statewide film festival," Hamilton said. "Then the theater becomes a venue with long-range impact to offer festivals that attract tourists and dollars to our towns and cities. It's a significant project in an area ripe for development."

Kathleen Schassler is a free-lance writer from Southington.