

## TAKE 2: WILL THE CAPITOL BRING BACK GORDON SQUARE?

Written by Tim Marshall

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Picture it: Cleveland, 1921. Handsome young couples — the women wrapped in furs to keep warm in the cool autumn air, the men dapper in their dark suits and long coats — leisurely walk east on Detroit Avenue, passing cafés and boutiques along the way, before making their final stop of the evening at the beautiful **Capitol Theatre**. The house quickly fills, the lights go dim, and the dotting projectionist sets a reel in motion to screen the latest Hollywood picture.

Ten years later, Clevelanders still flock to the well-appointed movie house, only by this time the talkies have made their debut. The fashions have changed, too, but one thing has remained: the Capitol is still the place to be.

Flash forward and decades later the manager doesn't just turn off the lights, but shuts off the power. Cobwebs and dust fill the seats instead of patrons. After a long time of neglect, the ceiling collapses. What was once a site for the see-and-be-seen set had sadly become an eyesore.

Fortunately for us, like a popular film from long ago, the Capitol is up for a remake. In fact it's the focal point of the Gordon Square Arts District, the artsy economic development campaign that's revitalizing the Detroit-Shoreway area. Can this renaissance neighborhood usher in a new era of movie magic? We think so.

Get your tickets, folks. It's show time.

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Joy Roller, executive director of the Gordon Square Arts District, and Jan Cline, development director, are busy.

Very busy.

Taking a break during an event — and in less than 20 minutes — the two walk me through the history and the future of the Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood and the landmark Capitol Theatre. During that brief time, they show me a film, provide me a number of press materials on the Capitol, field phone calls and greet visitors to their office.

Despite the flurry of activity, the two remain nothing less than charming, cool and collected. “Things are going incredibly well,” Cline says. “Oct. 1 is almost here and we’re ready.”

Really? Aren’t major construction projects like this — those funded through a variety of sources, those on which entire blocks and generations of people are depending — notorious for being behind schedule, I wonder out loud.

“We had the right combination of people and personalities on this project,” Cline responds. “Every one of them is invested in the Capitol because it’s an investment in Cleveland. We’re right on track.”

(Cline’s words are hardly lip service. It’s true. A walk-through of the soon-to-be reopened space would later reveal that, well, it’s ready to open.)

Amazing! Such a feat would poise a project like this to be a role model for other cities, I remark.

“Actually, we are already a national model for how art can serve as an economic catalyst,” Roller says, smiling.

It’s at this point that I decide to let Roller and Cline do the rest of the talking.

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**Jan Cline shows off the Capitol Theatre's renovated lobby**

The Capitol opened in 1921 as a silent-film and vaudeville venue. It was the evening and weekend destination for the masses, an institution decked out in art deco splendor that made west-siders proud.

In the 1930s it was updated to accommodate “talking pictures.” Lush, flowing curtains were added to baffle the sound in the grand space and the balcony.

Over the years, shifting social geography and a mix of other factors gradually led to the closing of the Capitol in the 1980s. But, almost since the day the doors were shuttered, community members were planning its revival.

And, as they say, good things came to those who were waiting.

After years of planning and conducting dense feasibility studies, the Gordon Square Arts District was announced. Through art and by attracting the creative class, it aims to do more than just put Detroit-Shoreway back on the map, but rather give the entire city of Cleveland a much-needed boost.

Gordon Square organizers positioned the renovation and reopening of the Capitol as the principal player in the neighborhood revitalization and arts expansion effort, which includes massive renovations to the streetscape that are also wrapping up this month.

According to Roller, the presence of the theater will bring an estimated 100,000 visitors per year, keeping Detroit-Shoreway's current restaurants, bars, and shops in the blackest black and encouraging more business owners to set up shop in the area.

“The Capitol will be the economic engine for the district,” she says. “It’s the key.”



**The large auditorium in the new Capitol Theatre**

The cost of reviving the Capitol is \$7.5 million (the total cost of the entire Gordon Square Arts District is reportedly \$30 million); studies indicate the project will leverage more than a half-billion dollars of real estate and economic development activity in the surrounding neighborhood.

After Roller leaves for a meeting, Cline takes me through the Capitol. The look is modern, with historic accents in the form of the original ornate molding and railings.

“We split the original 1,400-seat space into three separate theaters, a larger concession area and a

mezzanine lounge and reception area,” Cline says during my personal tour.

The main auditorium will seat 420; the two upstairs theaters can each seat about 100.

There’s irony in the rehab, too, in that this historic building will house the most modern cinema in the region. The projection systems will be completely digital, projecting perfectly polished pixels onto the silver screen. The main theater will be equipped with 3-D technology.

Although the renovation was conducted with the Capitol’s history in mind, it wasn’t technically a historic renovation. Rather, the project kept design elements from the 1920s (the captain’s wheel chandelier) and the 1930s update (the burnt orange curtains in the main theater) while adding new seats, screens and fixtures. The blend leads to a pleasing aesthetic.

Along the way, Cline points out some trivia about the space.

“We placed a time capsule inside this column,” he said. “The leaping gazelle ornaments in the two smaller theaters used to adorn the main space. If you look closely from the projection rooms, you can see what used to be the balcony.”

Cleveland Cinemas, the parent company of the popular Cedar Lee Theatre and other venues around the region, will operate the Capitol, though the Detroit-Shoreway Community Development Organization, a partner in the arts district, owns the building.

Any rumors you may have heard about the Capitol being a “west-side Cedar Lee,” a venue known for catering to independent film lovers, aren’t entirely true, Cline says.

“If anything, the Capitol will be a cross between the Cedar Lee and Shaker Square Cinemas, offering a mix of art/indie films and mainstream movies so that it will always be offering something for everyone in the neighborhood.”

The new Capitol makes its debut on Oct. 1 with a red-carpet gala, which sold out a month ago. A 10-day opening celebration full of public events begins Oct. 2.

Despite the fact that Cline and I are the only two people in the space, it nonetheless feels alive, much the same way the entire Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood has felt in recent months with events such as Made in the 216, scenes like the bustling patios of Luxe and Stone Mad, and the continued offerings of the avant-garde Cleveland Public Theatre.

For just a second, I can smell the popcorn and hear the applause. The space is ready and waiting for an audience; the doors long to be opened.

It’s then I realize that it won’t matter that the Capitol will screen must-see mainstream films, the most-favored of foreign features, and in-demand independent flicks. Nor in the grand scheme is it important that the theater will give hipsters another outlet for flashing their fabulousness.

The reopening of the theater represents something much more significant.

For the Capitol is the star of the Detroit-Shoreway story, and we all have a part to play to ensure that it never fades to black again.

Look for Spangle's exclusive coverage of the Capitol Theater's opening night gala next week.

### ***The Details***

*The October 1 opening gala of the Capitol Theatre may have sold out weeks ago, but there are plenty of other opportunities to walk the red carpet. Check out these events at the theater (located on West 65th Street at Detroit Avenue):*

*Friday, Oct. 2, 9:30 a.m.*

*Ribbon Cutting Ceremony*

*Starring: Mayor Frank Jackson and Councilman Matt Zone. A showing of Casablanca will follow the ceremony. Free! First-come, first-serve tickets will be available in the Gordon Square Arcade Atrium (6516 Detroit Avenue, Cleveland) beginning at 9 a.m. on Friday, Sept. 25, until they are gone.*

*Friday, Oct. 2, 7 p.m.*

*A Capitol Evening: Opening Night After Party*

*Starring: You and your friends and lovers. Choose one of three films to watch, then join all the guests for a party in the lobby. \$35/person. Purchase tickets at [clevelandcinemas.com](http://clevelandcinemas.com).*

*Sunday, Oct. 11, all day*

*Day Out at the Movies*

*Starring: You and a bunch of other fabulous queer film-lovers. Twenty percent of concession sales will benefit the LGBT Community Center of Greater Cleveland in honor of National Coming Out Day.*