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It's show time! Capitol Theatre reopening means flicks and fun on the West Side

By **Clint O'Connor, The Plain Dealer**
September 25, 2009, 12:00AM

The opening of a movie theater is not typically a five-star event. But when it's in Cleveland, as opposed to some distant shopping mall, and when it's expected to ignite 15 blocks worth of civic revitalization, it's a rare beast indeed.

Like so many well-intentioned, let's-bring-back-the-city crusades that have sprinkled ethereal hope dust over Cleveland for the past 30 years, the restoration of the **Capitol Theatre** could have taken a big, fat belly-flop into the cesspool of broken dreams.

But no.

This elaborate renovation project connecting Cleveland's past with its future actually succeeded. The new Capitol, at 1390 West 65th Street just north of Detroit Avenue, opens next weekend.

For the city's cultural and nightlife scene, the theater represents something film fans have been requesting for years: a movie house on the West Side that's convenient for Clevelanders, within striking distance of Lakewood and Rocky River, and one that might offer the independent and foreign fare available for decades at the Cedar Lee Theatre in Cleveland Heights.

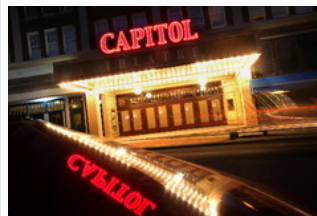
The project worked for two reasons, according to Jeffrey Ramsey, executive director of the **Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization**. One was fresh financial sources: the federal New Market Tax Credit and Ohio's Historic Tax Credit.

The other reason: "This is not a stand-alone theater," he said. "It is part of a partnership with Cleveland Public Theatre, the Near West Theatre and the neighborhood."

If it had just been the Capitol Theatre, said Ramsey, it never would have happened.

Loads of determined folks within his organization and the **Gordon Square Arts District**, which runs along Detroit Avenue from West 58th Street to West 73rd Street, made it a reality, along with about \$7.5 million from the tax credits, a city of Cleveland loan and grants from Cuyahoga County, the Cleveland Foundation and the Ohio Cultural Facilities Commission.

Organizers hope the sparkling movie house, which took 16 months to renovate and will employ about 20 people, draws film-goers who will spill into shops, restaurants, galleries and bars in the neighborhood before and after shows. The area is already on the rise with choice eateries, such as Luxe, La Boca and Stone Mad Irish Pub, drawing good crowds.



Thomas Ondrey

The Capitol opens to the public on Friday, Oct. 2.

Check out the Opening Weekend events.

Nearby Restaurants and bars.

Watch a video interview at the Capitol.

house and has been shuttered since 1963, used to seat nearly 1,400. It has been remodeled into three movie theaters. The main house will hold 420, while the two upstairs theaters, carved out of the old balcony, will seat nearly 100 each.

While the projection systems will be state-of-the-art digital, the renovation retained much of the site's original decorative touches, embracing the building's historic features. It's a great-looking theater, particularly the main house.

A gala fund-raiser Thursday night will be followed by a ribbon cutting and free movie Friday morning. Then, Friday afternoon, the theater opens to the ticket-buying public with three films: LeBron James' high school flashback, "More Than a Game"; Michael Moore's latest documentary, "Capitalism: a Love Story"; and the re-release of "Toy Story" and its sequel, packaged together in a new 3-D version.

The theatre hopes to draw 100,000 people a year. "The Capitol is the economic engine for the district," said Ramsey.

It's also just one step in the planned \$30 million dollar project that includes a major overhaul of the **Cleveland Public Theatre** (which starts next month), performance space for the **Near West Theatre** (anyone have \$3.5 million to donate?), and streetscape improvements that include widened sidewalks, new lighting and public art.

"Once the Capitol opens, there are going to be more amenities for my customers, more things for them to do in the neighborhood," said Raymond Bobgan, executive director of Cleveland Public Theatre, which is around the corner from the Capitol on Detroit Avenue. "They're going to be safer with the increased foot traffic and the improved streetscape, which will have more lighting and [better] parking."

There is also a presumed synergy that should benefit CPT. "I believe independent-movie goers would be the most logical place to expand our audience," said Bobgan.

Showing a mix of specialty, mainstream films

Which brings us to one perception that's worth clarifying.

Exhibit A. For years, this reporter has received dozens of phone calls and e-mails saying the same thing: Why don't we have a Cedar Lee on the West Side? Why do we have to schlep all the way to Cleveland Heights for foreign films, quirky indie fare and documentaries?

Exhibit B. Likewise, **Cleveland Cinemas**, which operates five theaters in Greater Cleveland, including the Cedar Lee, has received untold numbers of inquiries begging for alternatives to Hollywood hogwash on the West Side.

The Capitol, owned by the Detroit Shoreway organization, will be run by Cleveland Cinemas. You'd assume they'd be screaming from the rooftop, "Long suffering West Siders, your ship has come in. The Capitol will finally become a Cedar Lee of the West!"

Except it won't.

"It's not going to be the Cedar Lee," said Jon Forman, president of Cleveland Cinemas. "There will be mainstream movies along with some specialty programming. We want to make a commitment to showing specialty films at the Capitol, but we'll only be able to show them if the community supports them."

The programming at the Capitol will be akin to Shaker Square Cinemas, where more mainstream films drive attendance, with an occasional indie mixed in. If the Capitol sells enough tickets to, say, a dark, disturbing Danish drama, it will offer more subtitled cinema. If documentaries are a hit, it will schedule more.

One proven beneficiary of Forman's theaters is restaurants. The expansion of the Cedar Lee, which grew from one screen to six over several years, kick-started a restaurant revival along Lee Road. Ditto Shaker Square Cinemas, where the renovated former Colony Theatre, which Forman transformed into six screens, is the perfect complement to the square's buzzing restaurant scene.

It will take about a year before Cleveland Cinemas can truly gauge the success of the Capitol (the fall is traditionally a downtime for movie attendance). In the meantime, the re-opening lends the Capitol the dual distinction of being Cleveland's newest and oldest theater. The previous biggest overhaul was in the 1930s, when the theater was changed to accommodate a new invention: sound movies.

"It was a big deal to walk down to the Capitol," said Bernice Miller, who used to go to the theater with her girlfriends in the 1930s and 1940s. Even more fun was the roller rink in the basement (gone now, as is the old pool hall).

Movies cost 5 cents, and later, Miller managed to survive the outrageous price increase to 10 cents. Basically, for a quarter, you could take in a newsreel, cartoons, a double feature, grab some popcorn and candy and still have change.

Miller, nee Doy, now 82 and living in Brunswick, grew up near West 65th Street and Lorain Avenue where her father ran Doy's Candy Kitchen. When I first spoke with her, she couldn't recall the titles of specific films she had seen at the Capitol.

After consulting her childhood diaries, she called back a few days later to report that she saw "Jackass Mail" with Marjorie Main and Wallace Beery at the Capitol in 1942 and Lana Turner in the romantic "Marriage is a Private Affair" in 1945.

Miller hopes to return next week. "I want to see what they've done with the place."

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NO IMAGE

Posted by **rightalltime**

September 25, 2009, 8:05AM

Great news! And congrats to all of those who worked on this. A great addition to an area that has greatly improved (understatement) over the years.

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NO IMAGE

Posted by **trelobster**

September 25, 2009, 8:44AM

OK let's see...Tribe game or a movie...tough choice...I'll have a bucket of popcorn please, oh wait and a box of Snowcaps too...lol...had dinner at La Boca the other night loved the crab and lobster fritters...

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NO IMAGE

Posted by **punkwahoo**

September 25, 2009, 10:41AM

In the fifties and sixties my Hungarian grandmother would ask me to drive her to the Capitol so she could see movies in the Hungarian language. Some of my other buddies at the time did the same thing , and in the sixties the Capitol started to be called the " DP" show since many Hungarians new to this country would there to see movies . It's great to hear about it's resurrection.

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Posted by **Herse182**

September 25, 2009, 12:35PM

Moving in down the street from the theater in about a month. Can't wait to be a part of the revitalization of that neighborhood.

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Posted by **Eliza Wing**
September 25, 2009, 3:16PM

This is great news. I have to say that I am one of those pesky West Siders who asked Jon Forman why there was no theater like Cedar Lee on the West Side. Totally appreciate the need to make it a commercial venture though -- it is up to the community to get out and support the films he chooses to show.

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