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Monday, June 4, 2007

Big Plans for Old Theater: Pair hopes to transform Scenic into entertainment mecca

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ROCHESTER — Like the dusty, prehistoric-looking film projectors they inherited with the building, Patricia Splaine and Peter Ejarque have a vision.

They want to restore the historic Scenic Theater into an entertainment complex, a multifloored venue for the local arts scene.

They see children's shows, a basement piano bar geared to the business class, dancing, movie fanatics taking in hours of classics or second-run films and artists from across the land performing variety shows.

"We could have a Humphrey Bogart night or Sophia Loren night for guys who are still

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drooling over her," Splaine said.

The business partners say they want to harness the 95-year-old North Main Street building's art deco design to help revitalize downtown. They say the building, in the heart downtown, could also be home to civic events and political rallies.

"Rochester seems to be coming up, but I think people still go to Dover and Portsmouth because there aren't enough things to do in Rochester," said Splaine, who's been active in real estate.

"But we're getting there," she added.

It seems the venture, once fully complete, will be anchored by a dinner-theater experience in the back area of the building, where a 45-foot high ceiling with exposed beams frames the city's vaudeville history.

The stage appeared to be in good shape with the building acoustics seeming ready to welcome song.

The partners figure the space can hold at least 500 seats for the theater and also be used for a multithemed nightclub.

"We're going to have a dance floor in here. We can have rock 'n' roll bands and dancing ...," said Ejarque, a local entrepreneur who already owns a downtown business, the Blue Monkey ice cream shop.

While the project may seem like a tall order for a building that's sat vacant for about two decades, and folklore has "E.T." and "Star Wars" as the last movies aired there, it's not as though Splaine and Ejarque are starting from scratch.

The top-floor movie theater space has original and newer seats, two spiral staircases lead visitors to potential staging areas for disc jockeys, and vintage carbon arc projectors from the early 20th century occupy space for updated technology to showcase the stars.

The original Broadway-style marquee is in the basement, and may be restored.



Patricia Splaine and business partner Peter Ejarque hope to bring the former Scenic Theater back to life. They look over an early 20th century carbon arc projector in the building. (Krauss/Democrat photo)

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Patricia Splaine and business partner Peter Ejarque hope to transform the former Scenic Theater in downtown Rochester into a multiuse entertainment complex for the local arts scene. (Krauss/Democrat photo)

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balcony movie theater opens, and they hope to have things up and running by the end of summer or early fall.

Right now, Splaine and Ejarque are busy clearing space. Though the lights weren't on during a recent visit, everything from vintage bicycles to foosball tables could be gleaned from among all the memorabilia stacked along the walls.

The vision put forth by Splaine, who's owned the building since 1998 and recently ran a coffee shop on the first floor, and co-owner Ejarque doesn't mark the first time someone thought of doing something with the property. One idea floated decades ago was affordable senior housing, but the building has remained largely vacant, a target for vandals in the past.

Chip Noon, the Rochester Main Street program director, applauded efforts to reuse the theater. He's heard murmurings the project would compete with the Opera House, but "my theory is you can never have too many of those things."



Patricia Splaine looks back at business partner Peter Ejarque as they pass the outdated electrical switchboard that used to power the former Scenic Theater. (Krauss/Democrat photo)

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Right now, the partners' main focus is on the front part of the building, where they want a 60-seat restaurant with an international flair.

Splaine and Ejarque are in touch with the city concerning overall plans, especially installing a sprinkler fire system within the next couple of months and then geothermal heat and solar energy systems, something close to Ejarque's heart as a member of the Mayor's Energy and Sustainability Committee.

They also gained approval, required as the building lies within the city's historic district, to install new triple-pane windows.

No doubt, the partners disclosed, the renovation will be expensive, but they're heartened by the building's structural integrity. They said they'll begin approaching banks in the next few months.

There's no strict timeline for finishing the entire project, but the partners are already moving on major work, including air filtration and electrical upgrades.

The partners say they will begin work on the dinner-theater/nightclub area after the restaurant and

He added, "In a town like this you can have four, five different performing arts groups of one sort or another. ... It will draw people to Rochester, which is what we need."

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