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A Tale of Two Theaters

Lani brothers have big plans for Ely Theatre

By Rudy Herndon
Ely Times Reporter

Coming soon: A theater near you.

Now that they've finished work on Maggie's Lounge and Mr. G's Villa, brothers Chris and Brad Lani are moving full speed ahead with their plans to renovate the old Ely Theatre.

They haven't settled on a new name for the theater just yet, but virtually every other aspect of the restoration has been mapped out in advance.

Two financial backers have pledged almost total support for the project, which will transform the historic property into a state-of-the-art, multipurpose theater.

As envisioned by Chris Lani, the theater will be a venue for movie screenings, concerts and theatrical performances by local high school troupes and thespians from the Utah Shakespearean Festival.

While the Lanis aim to attract top-end performers to the theater, movies may be the main draw for many local residents -- especially younger people.

The theater will screen the latest Hollywood releases, as well as classics like "The Thin Man" and "Casablanca." From time to time, moviegoers can also expect to see more thought-provoking fare, such as the Academy Award-nominated documentary "An Inconvenient Truth."

In addition to hosting cultural events, the theater will ideally serve as a public forum, where residents can attend town hall-style meetings, lectures and debates.

"It will be a really unique facility," Chris said. "I want people to know that nothing like it has happened in Ely before."

To hear Chris tell it, the ambitious project might not have happened at all.

Since the theater shut down in 1963, alterations to the front of the building have rendered it virtually unrecognizable from the street level. Today, the remodeled lobby is occupied by Fantasy Fast Photo, and the old marquee has been replaced by an awning.



You could walk past Fantasy Fast Photo in the 400 block of Aultman every day and not realize you are seeing the vestige of Ely's premier movie house. But the theater, built in 1916 as a vaudeville theater, is still there (and on the National Register of Historic Places). New owners Chris and Brad Lani, however, plan to reopen the historic structure as a modern, multipurpose theater.

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In fact, the theater is so well-camouflaged that Chris -- who has worked on numerous theater restoration projects over the years -- had no idea it was even there.

"I had probably walked by it a hundred times without knowing it was a theater," he said.

It wasn't until he walked into the photo shop and struck up a conversation with the proprietor that he learned he was standing in an old theater. At that point, he immediately asked for the property owner's name.

Within a matter of months, Chris and Brad were conferring with owner Norm Goeringer. Those meetings ultimately led to the acquisition of the theater, along with the parcels that are now home to Maggie's Lounge and Mr. G's Villa.

The theater, which is one of just several Ely buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, was built in 1916 by architect Percy W. Hull. The Mission/Spanish Revival-style building began its life as a vaudeville hall that hosted a variety of live acts, ranging from acrobats and magicians to comedians and lecturers.

But that format proved to be short-lived, as audience interest shifted to movies. To cash in on the newest cultural craze, the building was reborn as a movie theater in 1923 and continued to show films until it shut down 40 years later.

It has become a cliché to say that "they don't make them like they used to," but no other phrase quite sums up the care that went into the construction of the building. That might explain why an initial inspection of the theater found it to be in excellent shape.

If preliminary engineering surveys uphold those findings, the Lanis hope to begin work on the project as soon as possible.

The auditorium will be reconfigured to seat between 300 and 500 people and may be upgraded to include a dance floor and an adjustable stage.

A digital projection system will be mounted above the auditorium, which will free up space in the old projection booth. Chris said he is thinking of transforming that space into a private lounge.

Speaking of lounges, patrons will be able to step directly into Maggie's during intermissions. As is the tradition at "theater pubs" in Portland, Ore., food and beer may be brought into the auditorium during regular screenings. Furthermore, catering services will be available for other special events held on the premises.

Some of the most striking changes to the theater will be visible from Aultman Street.

The front facade of the building will be reconstructed, most likely in cooperation with the Ely Renaissance Society. Meanwhile, the Fantasy Fast Photo space will give way to a new lobby, while the storefront next to Maggie's Lounge will be refurbished. (At the opposite end of the building, Herlines will remain open.)

Anyone who is interested in learning more about the project is encouraged to attend an open house and tour of the theater tomorrow night at 7 p.m. The open house, which will get under way at Maggie's Lounge, will include cocktails and a short presentation on the history of the building.

Visitors are advised to dress warmly.

If you have any information about the history of the theater, or you would be interested in joining a friends of the theater group, contact Chris Lani at 293-1070 or Brad Lani at 293-1191.

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