Updated: UC Theatre Renovation Project Unveiled

By Steven Finacom
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With a pull on a rope—and an assist from a man hidden atop the marquee—David Mayeri of the Berkeley Music Group and Mayor Tom Bates raised the curtain on the next stage in a long planned Downtown Berkeley project, the renovation and reopening of the UC Theatre.

Shuttered since 2001, the much missed and admired historic movie palace which originally opened in 1917 will be converted by the non-profit BMG into a 1,460 person capacity live venue. Construction is planned for completion in 2015.

The project was promoted Wednesday, April 23, 2014 with an event in the theatre lobby and the street outside.

Planned alterations include conversion of the raked, single level, interior with fixed seating into three tiers arranged with either theatre seating, or cabaret-style table seating for 800, a dance floor,
challenge grant at the event.

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Chamber of Commerce CEO Polly Armstrong listens while City Councilmember Jesse Arreguin, who represents the Downtown, spoke at the event.

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The non-profit Berkeley Music Group plans to initially program 75-100 shows a year, “featuring a culturally diverse range of local, national, and international artists performing music genres ranging from Americana to zydeco and everything in between”, according to their press release.

“The UC Theatre will be an all-ages venue”, and the programming will include live comedy, film events, and a speaker series, as well as opportunities for other local non-profits to use the theatre for fundraising events.

Mayeri, who grew up in Berkeley and worked for 35 years for Bill Graham Presents, mastering the live music event trade, told the assembled crowd “when I went into the UC Theatre a few years back, I could exactly see the potential for the room.”

“We’re thrilled to announce the start of construction this summer.” $2.7 has been raised to date, he said, of the planned $5.2 million project. He also announced an anonymous $250,000 challenge grant. “Today we ask for your support. We ask you to join us to ‘turn on the lights’.”

Several local dignitaries made brief remarks, emceed by Berkeley Chamber of Commerce CEO Polly Armstrong, who said of the legendary 22 year run of weekly Rocky Horror Picture Show screenings at the UC, “I was too old, but my kids did” go to them.

She said her children could probably supply some appropriate Rocky Horror quote for the occasion. (“A toast!” murmured someone in the audience, channeling one of the lines from the cult movie, where the audience would toss bread and a Meyer Sound system.
Mayor Tom Bates (front left) and Mayeri pulled a rope to unveil the new marquee message on University Avenue.

from the back rows.)

“It’s so painful (the UC) has been unused for the past decade”, Armstrong said. The new project, proposed and approved by the City several years ago, would “help push the UC Theatre into the next and final stage of success.”

“I’m just so pleased that this venue is about to open”, said Mayor Tom Bates. “Can you imagine what this will mean to the Downtown? We have so many great restaurants and this is just the icing on the cake.”

After praising Downtown restaurants again, Bates rhapsodized that “this is the one thing we’re missing, a great entertainment place!”

Armstrong adroitly hastened back to the podium to clarify, “I’m sure Tom didn’t mean we’re missing a great live entertainment venue” Downtown, reminding him the Freight and Salvage exists on the next block. “He just means a 1,460 seat” venue, larger than the Freight and Salvage, she assured the audience, as Bates sat back down.

A later speaker was the acting director of the Freight and Salvage, who told the Berkeley Music Group team, “I’m here to welcome you to the neighborhood. We grow together. I’m totally excited that this place is coming back to life. We look forward to opportunities to collaborate on bookings.”

“This concert venue will bring entertainment, vitality,” said Councilmember Jesse Arreguin, who represents Downtown Berkeley. “This is so critical to economic vitality and health. I can’t wait for the opening, and to come see the shows here.”

Several speakers praised Mayeri’s tenacity in leading and promoting the planned project over
several years. “I’m guessing there’s no one in the room who hasn’t gotten a call from David saying, ‘can I buy you some coffee and talk about the UC Theatre?’”, Armstrong said. “He wins the passion prize.”

“David Mayeri is a hell of a bulldog”, said Downtown Berkeley Association head John Caner. “I think he’s going to do it.” “University Avenue has been a little sorry”, Caner said. “Let’s share the love on University Avenue. This is really key as an anchor” for surrounding restaurants and businesses.

Caner said that UC students had told him “what we really want is not to (have to) go to San Francisco”, for live entertainment. “This is really a wonderful, wonderful opportunity.”

He pledged $1,000 for the challenge grant match, first saying ten thousand, then quickly correcting himself. “I’m on a non-profit budget.” Polly Armstrong said “I’ll match that $1,000!” and two others in the audience, including local attorney Moni Law, also quickly spoke up to pledge the same amount.

City of Berkeley Economic Development Director Michael Caplan noted, “sometimes the biggest vision, the most transformative vision, is the one that see’s what’s there—that sees what can be a better version of itself.” He noted that the old UC Theatre was one of Downtown’s early entertainment venues. “It’s the first and oldest and in some ways the most powerful because of that. Let’s make Downtown the best cultural destination in the Bay Area.”

Kevin Williams, from Berkeley Youth Alternatives, spoke, explaining a partnership program that would particularly bring West and South Berkeley youth to the new venue for internships and programs learning about live concert promotion and the entertainment business.

Observing that the attending crowd was almost entirely white, Williams said, “we appreciate the emphasis on diversity” in the planned educational programs. “We want to make sure that our kids down in the community actually come up this way.”

Speakers from Meyer Sound, including Helen Meyer, praised the project and described the state of the art sound technology they would be providing.

After the speakers and a five minute video, the crowd went outside where one lane of University Avenue was blocked off and Bates and Mayeri unveiled the marquee, now reading “Let’s Turn on the Lights!” and giving the website for the project, www.theUCtheatre.org
The large, single level, theatre interior was open for viewing during the event and looked much as it did during its film repertory days, although smelling musty and looking somewhat battered from more than a decade of closure. There was some apparent water damage, some pieces of plaster were missing from portions of the walls and ceiling, decorative end panels on the seats were gone, and some areas appeared to have had graffiti painted over, but most of the space was intact.

The proposed project, if completed, would bring to an end community worries about loss of the theatre space which closed in 2001. Previous concepts for it—including a proposal to chop the large theatre up into smaller spaces—were floated, but died.

In recent years there had been worries that the boarded up theatre, which includes storefronts along University Avenue and a second level of housing above the commercial strip, would either fall into complete disrepair, or be snapped up for development and demolished. The theatre was landmarked in 2002 after a landmark application petition was submitted by concerned citizens reacting against a plan to build apartments on the site.

The author wrote more than a decade ago about the potential of the then-threatened UC Theatre to become a non-profit community performance space: A plan to save UC Theatre, nurture arts.

A list of other Planet articles about the history of the U.C. Theater can be found here: