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UC Theatre's new harmony: Nonprofit revives historic downtown venue

Berkeley Music Group plans 1,460 seats, restaurant and bar

Berkeley renaissance

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The **UC** Theatre has been sitting empty on 2036 University Ave. in Berkeley for nearly 14 years. At the moment, there's no clearly defined door — just a padlock and latch on a black boarded-up wall.

But all that is about to change. Revived by new nonprofit Berkeley Music Group and headed by longtime Bill Graham Presents executive [David Mayeri](#), the theater is getting new life as a live performance venue.

The new UC, which closed in 2001, will be reopening as an all-ages music venue — a la Oakland's Fox Theater — with a full-service restaurant, bar and a floor plan to fit 1,460 people.

Mayeri said his team is close to starting construction and has raised more than half of the fundraising goal of \$5.5 million. He expects the project to open in the fall and be the only venue of its type and size in the East Bay. With a sound system from Berkeley audio firm Meyer Sound, the space will host 100 shows each year, including rock, hip-hop and global music concerts, as well as comedy shows, film and speaker series, and other programming.

At 1,460 seats, or 900 if the flexible space is being used for cabaret tables and chairs, the theater fills a niche between small venues such as the Freight & Salvage, which seats 400, and the large Berkeley Community Theater, which holds 3,491 people.

Originally envisioned as a for-profit venture with [Warren Hellman](#) as a major investor, plans for the project changed after the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass founder's death in 2011. Mayeri and his team see the theater as not just a music venue, but as a community and education resource.

The theater will generate about 150 full and part-time jobs when it opens. The plan, Mayeri said, is to have an education program with workshops that will mentor 17- to 25-year-olds in the technical, creative and business aspects of the concert industry. It will set up internships in the field by teaming up with Berkeley Youth Alternatives and Oakland's Youth UpRising. Mayeri got his start at Bill Graham Presents as a high school intern and eventually ended there as chief operating officer.

The theater, which was named for the University of California but has no relation to the school, was built in 1917 and designed by Berkeley architect [James Plachek](#). It was acquired in 1974 by theater owner [Gary Meyer](#) as one of the first theaters in his Landmark Theatres chain, where it often showed double and triple features of film classics.

The theater makeover joins a recent revitalization of Berkeley's downtown in which an influx of new housing, restaurants and cultural amenities is flooding the corridor.

Following the 2012 approval of a rezoning plan that took about a decade to approve, the city is posed to add more than 1,000 new units of housing. And projects like the University of California's new 82,000-square-foot home for the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive on Center and Oxford streets that is set to open in early 2016, as well as recently opened restaurants and retail, are driving a cultural revival of the area.

Annie covers hospitality & food.