The forgotten history of the UC Theatre

If you've ever wandered down University Avenue, you may have passed a boarded-up marquee between Shattuck Avenue and Milvia Street and wondered, “What is that? What's going on in there?”

There are two correct responses to that question. One would be, “Nothing, anymore.” And the other? “Nothing ... yet.”
This seemingly abandoned building is actually a historical landmark in the town of Berkeley. It’s been protected since 2002, when it went out of business because of lagging ticket sales and a call for renovations that were just too expensive.

The UC Theatre, as it is called despite having no actual affiliation to the university, was built in 1917 and designed by James W. Plachek. Does that name sound familiar? It might — Plachek was the noted Berkeley architect of the city’s original Main Library and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Civic Center Building. Opened as the movie industry began to boom in America, the “motion picture theater” was designed to seat up to 1,300 patrons. And it did, serving thousands of customers who came to see movies as they evolved from black-and-white silent films to Technicolor “talkies.”

Closed only briefly for a remodeling after a 1940 fire, the theater continued to show feature films until the 1970s, when the ownership of the building switched hands. Gary Meyer, a partner of Landmark Theaters, the largest independent art-house movie theater chain in America, acquired the UC Theatre in 1976.

After that, the UC Theatre began to show revival films, usually in double or triple features, becoming one of the foremost venues in the Bay Area to play both domestic and foreign classics. It became known for its late-night live “Rocky Horror Picture Show” renditions until 2001, when the theater was closed because it needed seismic retrofitting and Landmark Theaters could not afford it.

Despite the theater standing bare-boned for a few years after its closing, the city hoped it would be saved. Different plans were considered, from Oakland’s Kimball’s Carnival looking to turn it into a jazz club in 2005 to a possible reopening by Meyer as a movie palace again.

Finally, in 2009, the current plan of converting the theater into a musical venue was proposed by David Mayeri, Berkeley native and UC Berkeley alumnus, of Bill Graham Presents, an entertainment company that works to promote musicians and organize concerts. Mayeri got his start in the music industry with an internship at the Berkeley Community Theatre.
He hopes to be able to provide the same opportunities to current Berkeley residents and, as a means of reopening the theater and carrying out his proposition, set up a nonprofit organization through which to start the project. The Berkeley Music Group, as it is called, seeks to "oversee the theater's refurbishment, its concerts and youth-oriented educational programming."

At the theater's press conference on Wednesday, he announced that the theater is officially slated to reopen by fall 2015 after undergoing construction beginning this summer. The Berkeley Music Group has already raised more than half of the $5.2 million that the project needs for reconstruction, which will implement a state-of-the-art audio sound system and theatrical lighting, build a general admission floor and remodel cabaret-style tables and chairs in the seating hall. Overall, the total capacity will be 1,460 people.

The UC Theatre is already well on its way to becoming a staple in the Downtown Berkeley arts district. Once the theater is open, he said, it will host up to 100 musical acts, film showings, comedians and speaker lectures a year. It will be both open to the public for community events and available for private rental for parties. Mayeri and Berkeley city officials, including Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates, hope the reopening of the theater will revitalize University Avenue, providing an economic boost for surrounding stores and restaurants.

In addition, the Berkeley Music Group is set to initiate programs for youth at the theater. After a career in concert production of more than 30 years, Mayeri will re-establish the same types of experiences he had that first got him interested in it. He will offer hands-on workshops, internships and paid job opportunities to Berkeley residents ages 17 through 25 to foster community involvement through cultural events.
UC Berkeley students, both those interested in the music industry and event production and those who simply enjoy a good time, will be wise to take advantage of the new “old” theater when it reopens its doors next year.

Image Sources: Rina Neiman of the Berkeley Music Group

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Correction(s):
A previous version of this article incorrectly stated that David Mayeri interned at the UC Theatre. In fact, he interned at the Berkeley Community Theatre.