

# HawaiiBusiness

## Encore for the Hawaii Theatre.

(restoration proposal)

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The spruce-up of a former Chinatown moviehouse could also help make over the streets of downtown Honolulu.

Saving historic structures from demolition in downtown Honolulu has become a passion for dermatologist Norman Goldstein. And preserving the grand Hawaii Theatre from being razed was simply paramount, in his view. The showhouse's restoration, according to Goldstein, would resuscitate the city center and its economy, especially after dark. "People didn't understand the potential of reviving the area," he says. "Once businesspeople realized the benefits of rejuvenation, they became very interested and helpful."

Goldstein, an active board member of the Hawaii Theatre Center, has led the effort to raise the collective consciousness of the corporate sector. The center is currently in the midst of its second campaign drive, and has accumulated \$15.7 million of its \$21-million goal as of January.

At construction's finale, the playhouse--to be called The Hawaii--will be home to operas, symphonies, plays, musicals, ballets, chamber music performances, as well as seminars and community workshops. With performance space in short supply on Oahu, the Hawaii Theatre, says HTC executive director Sarah Richards, could be a magnet to attract more performers to the islands.

But advocates of the project say the theater's rebirth is incidental to the bigger picture--it could also serve as a cornerstone of the overall renaissance of downtown Honolulu. According to American Trust Co. of Hawaii founder Robert Midkiff, Hawaii Theatre Center's current campaign steering committee chairman, the theater is the catalyst that will help bring the area back to life after dark, drawing business to neighboring retail shops, restaurants and galleries. In addition, the area houses about 12,000 residents, and more apartments are coming on line--the Harbor Court residential and commercial complex, for example, is slated for completion next year.

HANA HOU. Downtown Honolulu, however, was not always celebrated for its business and residential reputation. During the '30s, the area was a bustling center for evening entertainment. The Alexander Young Building on Bishop and King streets, for example, was a busy hotel and office with a rooftop used at night for weddings, formal dinner parties and ballroom dancing.

The Hawaii Theatre itself--located on Bethel and Pauahi streets--was built in 1922 by Consolidated Amusement for \$500,000. Used for vaudeville acts, plays and musicals, the playhouse showcased international and local celebrities and musical artists including Italian soprano Amelita Galli-Curci and local operatic tenor Tandy MacKenzie. Later, in the 1950s, the theater was used strictly for film showings as motion pictures gained in popularity. But the downtown area also began its downward slide in the '50s and lost its nighttime appeal when Waikiki became Oahu's thriving entertainment hub. The showhouse closed in the early 1970s.

The movement to rescue the site was launched in the early 1980s by the Hawaii Organ Society, which met in the theater every month. The group had heard that the property was being put on the auction block by owner Bishop Estate, and that a mainland firm negotiating to purchase the real estate had concrete plans for the parcel: turning it into a parking garage.

The society's members, aware of Goldstein's interest in preserving historic buildings, asked the doctor to join them in their quest to save the site. In 1984 he helped form the Hawaii Theatre Center, an

organization which would spearhead the campaign to purchase the theater and property. Goldstein and his wife, well-known artist Ramsay, put up \$25,000 of their own money to hold the option to the parcel. Bishop Estate, worried about a potential public relations nightmare upon destruction of the landmark, was relieved. The Hawaii Theatre Center raised the remaining funds through bank loans and contributions and purchased the parcel for \$1.1 million in 1986.

PLENTY OF WORK ON THE BILL. That was just Act I. Still ahead was the return of the theater, listed on national and state registers of historic places, to its original splendor. That meant maintaining the historical accuracy of details such as the original pipe organ, stagehead mural and gilded columns.

Sitting unused for about two decades, the building was also suffering from extensive termite damage. Structural work on the roof, stage and ceiling dome was mandated. In addition, modern building codes had to be adhered to and state-of-the-art technology incorporated, which included new lighting and sound systems and an orchestra pit powered by an hydraulic lift.

The master plan calls for additional square footage, which will house a four-story pavilion as well as larger rehearsal space and banquet facilities. To accommodate the expansion, two parcels behind the theater were purchased by the HTC for \$2.18 million in 1989 and 1990. (One remaining parcel would later be acquired in December 1992--75 percent of the property donated by the owner and the remaining \$520,000 purchased by the center.) The HTC contracted nationally renowned New York-based architect Malcolm Holzman, who drew up the theater's restoration details, as well as Denver-based contractor M.A. Mortenson, which commenced construction in March of 1992.

The project, however, will only see completion when the remaining \$5.5 million is raised. HTC is busily seeking funding from both public and private sectors. The cause has won assistance from public concerns including the state of Hawaii, which appropriated \$10.4 million over the past six years, as well as the National Endowment of the Arts, which awarded the project \$50,000 in 1989. The private sector has been equally supportive. The Atherton Family Foundation, for example, has donated \$650,000 since 1987, and more than 100 local corporations have contributed a combined \$1.6 million over the past five years.

Midkiff, however, notes that the fund-raising effort has been slowed recently because of the attention directed toward recovery efforts on Kauai. "Although HTC has raised a total of more than \$5 million from the private sector, it's still disappointing with respect to our current needs," he says.

The center is planning to launch a revised campaign in 1993, which will entail memorial sales of the theater's 1,400 seats. At \$5,000 a seat, a contributor can have a personalized name plaque placed on a seat-back. If it is a sell-out, the effort will help raise the remaining \$5.5 million needed to complete the restoration, which is scheduled for mid-1994.

FIGHTING A RAUNCHY REPUTATION. Making the fund-raising even more difficult is downtown Honolulu's modern-day reputation as one wrought with nighttime seaminess. Norm Goldstein, for one, disagrees with the negative connotation. "There is a misconception concerning this area after dark," says Goldstein, who along with Ramsay owns an office building on Smith Street. "But there really is no problem here."

Midkiff, who was initially reluctant to get involved in the theater project because of its history as a pornographic moviehouse, notes that the area's new police substation on Nuuanu and Hotel streets should allay such fears. In addition, parts of the neighborhood are already restored or under renovation, such as Chinatown, Nuuanu Avenue and Fort Street Mall.

This is in line with the continuing trend to light up the streets of the picturesque area. "We're very excited about the revival of downtown," says Richards. "And the theater is vital to that revival. Not only will the theater anchor Hawaii's past, it will also provide residents with first-rate entertainment."