

WASHINGTON

DC's iconic Uptown Theater may be readying reboot, documents show



WASHINGTON – The Uptown Theater at 3426 Connecticut Avenue, NW, in Washington, D.C. The theater has been closed since March 2020, but a recently-discovered electrical work permit has hinted at restoration being done inside the iconic building to reopen it as a movie theater. (Chris Barylick/Capital News Service)

BY CHRIS BARYLICK AND EMILY HAHN - 4 HOURS AGO

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WASHINGTON – On March 13, 2020 – at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic – the nation’s capital was surprised by the sudden closure of the Uptown Theater, an iconic single-screen movie house that for decades hosted premieres and was beloved by film buffs throughout the metropolitan region.

Now the theater appears on the verge of a comeback, according to documents filed with the city, although both the owner and the architect so far are tight-lipped about their plans.

The Uptown Theater, on Connecticut Avenue in the heart of Washington’s Cleveland Park neighborhood, was completed in 1936. The building was built around an art-deco style and designed by John Jacob Zink.

The theater had an 1,300-person seating capacity, including a balcony, and a giant curved screen measuring 70 feet wide by 40 feet tall that made it THE place for customers to see a movie.

Over the years, the Uptown hosted premieres such as “2001: A Space Odyssey” in 1968, “Dances with Wolves” in 1990, and “Jurassic Park” in 1993.



WASHINGTON – The idle box office of the Uptown Theater at 3426 Connecticut Avenue, NW in Washington, D.C. The theater has been closed since March 2020, the point-of-sale equipment has been removed from the box office, and white paper has been installed over the windows to block outside views of restoration work being done inside the building to reopen it as a movie theater. (Chris Barylick/Capital News Service)

“When the first ‘Star Wars’ movie came out in May 1977, the theater showed the movie throughout the night for weeks, and hundreds of moviegoers would line up in front of our house with the line stretching for blocks up Newark Street,” Judy Kopff, a Cleveland Park neighborhood resident since 1974, told Capital News Service.

Kopff also recalled inviting 50 friends to join her and her husband, Gary, at the Uptown to watch “The Right Stuff” for her 37th birthday. The theater’s ushers chastised the group for serving champagne along with birthday cake.

The Uptown’s closure, which came without warning, coincided with COVID-19 business closures that were rampant in 2020.

The movie titles and showtimes were pulled off its marquee signage; upcoming movie posters were removed; the ticket booth was emptied of its point-of-sale equipment. The doors were covered with white paper that now obstructs outsiders’ views of what might be going on inside the theater.

Beyond the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Uptown, like the rest of the movie theater industry, began to see increased competition from streaming services.

“It’s tough times for movie theaters...you can watch so many movies on your computer or on your television,” said Bonnie LePard, president of the board of directors of the Cleveland Park Historical Society.

For more than a year, the Uptown sat closed with residents and passersby walking down Connecticut Avenue and wondering about the fate of the centerpiece of the neighborhood.

But clues began to emerge. Last October, the Uptown’s address was found on a new liquor license application, according to Commissioner Sauleh Siddiqui, a Cleveland Park resident and a member of the Advisory Neighborhood Council 3C05.

“Our ANC passed a resolution supporting their ABRA (Alcoholic Beverage Regulation Administration) license last year. I know there are improvements going on inside the theater,” Siddiqui said in an email.

A separate permit for electrical work inside the Uptown Theater states that both the existing and proposed use for the site is as a motion picture facility.

Kaleb Electric, LLC of Burke, Virginia, is assigned to do the electrical work and Mitiku G. Bela is listed as the master electrician for the project.

CNS found that a permit application for construction within the theater has been received by the District of Columbia’s Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs.

“It’s a great project,” said Thomas Rael, whose firm, RaelArchitecture(s) of New York, also appears on the approved permit for electrical work at the Uptown Theater site. Rael declined to go into further detail about the work being done inside the historic building.

For both residents of the neighborhood and fans of the Uptown Theater’s beloved art deco architecture, historical preservation-related protections have been put into place – and additional ones applied for – in order to keep the building’s famous facade intact.

“The building has its first layer of protection that’s fully in place is that it’s listed as a contributing resource to the Cleveland Park Historic District,” said Steve Knight, president of the Art Deco Society of Washington.

Knight also pointed out the Cleveland Park Historical Society and the D.C. Preservation League jointly filed for a landmark designation of the Uptown Theater building in 2021.

The designation would provide an additional layer of protection for the building and prevent changes to its exterior. The landmark nomination for the Uptown Theater will be going before the DC Historic Preservation Review Board in late May.

“We hope it will be approved,” said LePard.

One of the most pressing questions is who will operate the Uptown should it reopen.

Before the closing in March 2020, movie theater chain AMC Theatres functioned as the operator. The Pedas family, which owns the Circle Management Company, owns the Uptown Theater itself.

Media reports from October 2021 stated that movie theater chain Landmark Theatres might be next to operate the Uptown, as AMC’s lease ended in 2020 and AMC removed the movie projector from the theater once its lease expired.

Since then, nothing concrete has been announced as to who the next operator will be.

There have been friendly email exchanges between the Cleveland Park Historical Society’s “Save the Uptown” committee and George Pedas, of the Circle Management Company, according to LePard.

“When I asked him first about the Landmark (chain)...he just said that they were in conversations with Landmark and it was just too early,” LePard said, explaining her email exchanges with Pedas.

Representatives of Circle Management declined requests to comment for this story.

LePard said Pedas had indicated to her in emails that major electrical work in the theater would take considerable time. The owner also let LePard know that he was trying to be patient as work continued to reopen the old building as a movie theater.

“I just think it’s iconic and of special value to the city of Washington, D.C.,” Bonnie LePard concluded, a sentiment many people in the city share with her.

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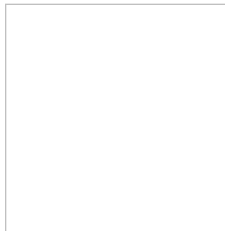
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