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INSIDE U^{the}PTOWN



Local developer George Altamura talks about the restoration of the Uptown Theater. He predicts he'll open the theater in 2008. Top, the lobby area of the Uptown shows its Art Deco touches. J.L. Sousa/Register photos

Altamura offers tour of Uptown Theater

The Uptown Theater holds a lot of memories for Napers, from its opening in 1937 to its last gasp -- as a modern-day four-plex -- in the 1990s.

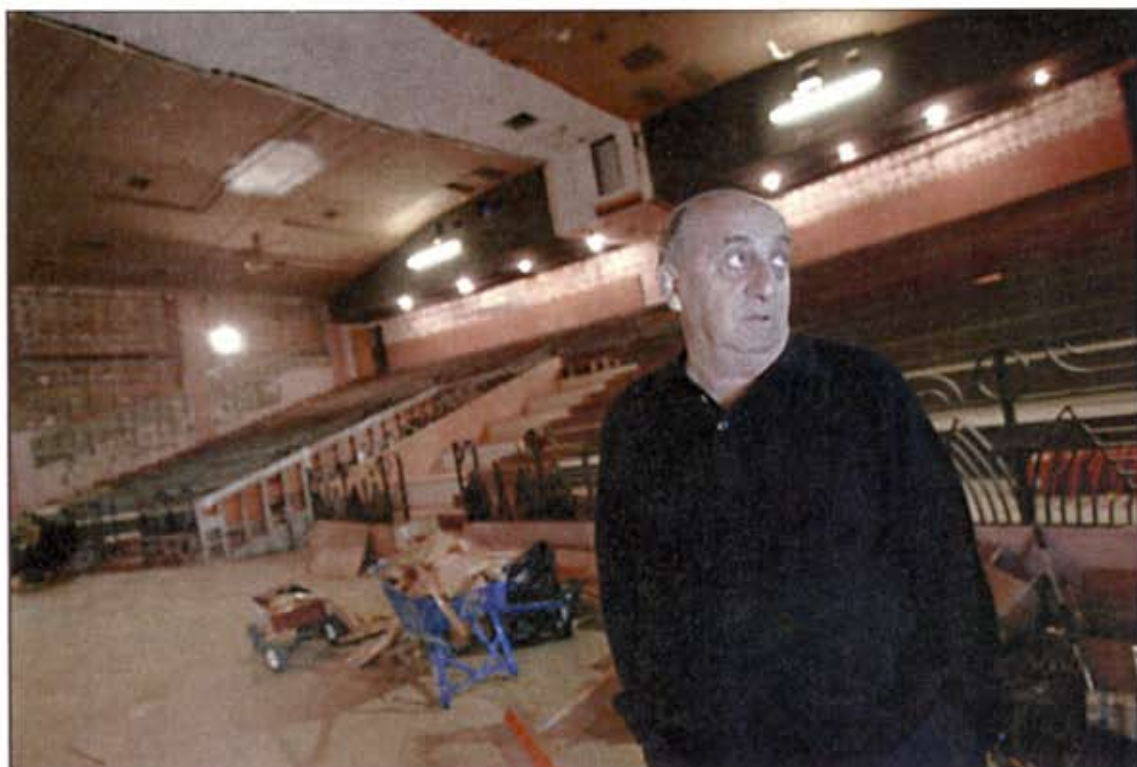
But the theater also holds a future, and last week co-owner George Altamura allowed two Register staffers inside to take a peek at the substantial restoration work going on.

Over the years, Altamura has offered various dates for projected openings, but a number of factors -- the complexity of the restoration work and the ups and downs of the downtown Napa economy among them -- have slowed things down.

Altamura now estimates that the theater will open to the public sometime in 2008. He said he expects it to be a venue for concerts and other live events, with the occasional feature film or premiere.

"I want it to open up more than anybody," said Altamura. "People come up and say things to me (about how they'd like to see it open), but I want to open even more than them."

As he walked around the interior of the building, Altamura pointed out pieces of Art Deco material and design elements



Napa Developer George Altamura in the Uptown Theater

left over from the halcyon days, and painted a picture of how the Uptown will look when all the work is done.

The old grandeur

As Altamura walked through the vast theater space, three carpenters placed sturdy slabs of hardwood onto the new, dramatically expanded stage. What was once little more than a narrow walkway underneath the big screen is now a crescent-shaped performance space arcing out into the front rows.

The massive interior walls -- installed to create four theaters in the cavernous space that once held more than 1,300

seats -- are gone. All that's left of them are the scars on the once-elaborately painted ceiling, and the holes the pillars made in the floor that slopes from the lobby to the foot of the stage.

In the lobby, mostly an empty space today, Altamura points to purple-and-gold painted wall and fixture details that he says will be fully refurbished. Bars will occupy both wings of the lobby, including the one where Altamura remembers Sciafano Furrier having a storefront years ago.

He said he plans to restore the women's lounge while installing separate, handicapped-accessible bathrooms to

meet current regulations. The green room, just off the stage in a separate building, is also getting a makeover.

The theater ceiling still holds traces of its former glory. One can see the outline of a nymph, a horse, and a huge arch with details including stars on the ceiling high above the stage.

Altamura said soon scaffolding will be constructed inside to allow workmen to repair the plaster and recreate the original designs. The closer one gets to the ceiling he said, the more the traces of the original can still be made out.

The interior walls of the cavernous space are

now down to the studs and lath. But Altamura sees them with their four-foot wainscoting back in place, velvet drapes covering the walls.

Inside the auditorium, a handful of theater chairs stand side by side, demonstration seats sent by manufacturers for Altamura to consider. Some have cupholders, some do not, all are wider than the old 16-inch to 17-inch seats the theater used to have. Altamura noted that Americans are wider and more used to comfort than they used to be, and said he expects to install seats that are 22 or 23 inches wide.

Partly as a result, the theater is expected to hold about 900 patrons instead of the old 1,300.

Outside, the paint job on the front of the theater is complete, while the tile work at the lobby entrance is not. The final doors will probably come in the last stages, after other heavy material has been moved in and out.

Altamura said he will build a cashier's cage -- a square etched in the old tile near the sidewalk shows where the old one was -- but that it probably will not see much use when the Uptown re-opens.

"Most tickets will be pre-sold," Altamura said. "But we want it to look like the original."

The city of Napa

recently placed an extended curb near the theater, which will protect the Uptown marquee should tall vehicles park in front.

On the cusp?

Many Napers wonder at the pace of change at the Uptown. Altamura says that while he wants to complete the work and open the theater, he also says it would have made no business sense to re-open the Uptown earlier. Altamura said that his earlier timelines for opening hinged on other changes to downtown Napa -- the construction of more upscale hotels and the end of the flood control project -- expected to usher in a transformation of the city center.

When Altamura and his business partners acquired the theater in 2000, flood control work was supposed to end seven or eight years later.

The dot-com rush that fed hopes for a hotel boom suggested change was coming quickly.

But 9/11 knocked the wind out of the downtown land rush, and the hotels have not yet been built. Flood control, originally projected to wrap up this year, is now estimated to be complete in 2015 or later.

Nonetheless, Napa appears again to be on the cusp of change. The Westin-Verasa, a 160-



Renovations are under way on the interior

room condo hotel near the Wine Train, towers over the northern edge of the Napa River Oxbow, nearly complete. Another 140-room hotel is expected to go up on First and Franklin streets next year. A developer has plans for Ritz-Carlton to open a riverside resort near Silverado Trail and First Street.

The Napa River promenade from the Hatt Building to Veteran's Memorial Park is nearly complete. Just west of the promenade, a huge hole in the ground is the beginning of the Riverfront, a mixed condo and retail project slated to

open in 2009.

A four-story parking garage is being built near the Hatt Building, just a few blocks from the Uptown.

Altamura said he thinks he may still take a financial "bite" if he opens too soon, but that the economic conditions are almost in place to make the Uptown a success in its new incarnation.

And Altamura remembers the original. He moved to Napa in 1947. In those days, he said, "I used to come here every week."