

North Park's new heart

Theater building's reopening raises curtain on community's comeback

By Roger M. Showley
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Arturo Avila of Quality Painting and Wall Coverings masked and then painted the theater ceiling last May. Workers operated from a scaffolding they called the "dance floor."

When the North Park Theatre Building opened at the end of 1928, local news reports called it "the biggest thing in the rapid development" of the growing community.

The theater's reopening this month, after standing dark for nearly 20 years, is sparking similar visions of a revitalized, thriving North Park. And as was promised 77 years ago, "other big improvements are contemplated."

At least 11 other projects – from condos to a new library – are in the works in the immediate vicinity of the theater at University Avenue and 29th Street.

"North Park is the next Renaissance," said Robert Ito, who is converting the 1990 Palisades Pointe apartments to the 32-unit Palisade Gardens condo complex at the corner of Utah Street and University Avenue. The project is on the site of the former Palisade Gardens roller rink he remembers from his youth.

Another San Diego-born developer, Christopher Sickels, said he, too, was drawn to North Park to build about 34 condos at Iowa and University. He grew up in a home at 31st Street and Adams Avenue in adjacent Normal Heights.

"I'm trying to prove that you can go home again," he said.



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune
The historic North Park Theatre restoration is nearly finished. The Lyric Opera San Diego, the managing tenant, plans a dedication Sept. 30.

Jay Turner, executive director of the North Park Main Street program that encompasses the neighborhood's business district, said the current revival of interest is directly related to the theater's reopening.

"This theater for many of the people in the community and those who moved away is the symbol of North Park," Turner said.

A theater reborn

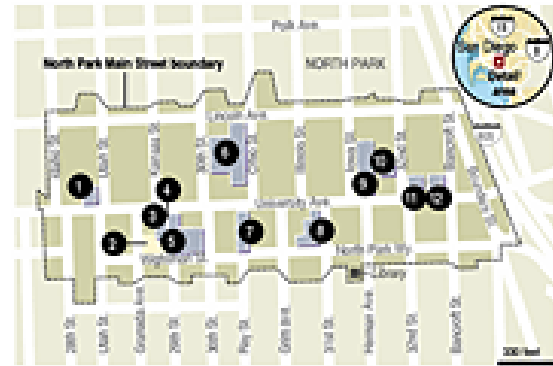
The theater is being renamed the Stephen and Mary Birch North Park Theatre to honor the Birch Foundation's \$1 million donation to the project. A second \$1 million donation has been received anonymously.

Longtime San Diegan Bud Fischer lived in North Park and attended movies there. Having undertaken many historic-preservation projects downtown and elsewhere, he bought the theater for \$1 from the city in exchange for restoring it with little or no profit anticipated. The original budget of \$3.5 million has more than doubled, with most of the cost borne by Fischer until the city and the theater's managing tenant, Lyric Opera San Diego, can pay him back. He's also developing the city-subsidized, \$11 million parking garage under construction across the street.

Councilwoman Toni Atkins, who represents the area, is the third council member to have championed the theater's preservation, starting with Gloria McColl in 1989, who won \$900,000 in city funds to buy the property. Regular use ceased in 1985, and a string of proposals for the building fell through until Fischer agreed to take up the project.

"I think it's just going to make North Park a cultural hub in the city," Atkins said, "and people will start coming back into our older urban communities and urban villages because so much of this is going on."

Like many older suburbs close to downtowns all over America, North Park thrived in the 1920s. The North Park Theatre opened in January 1929 as the first local movie house designed specifically for showing "talkies"; the stage apparently was rarely used as originally planned for vaudeville shows or other live performances.



North Park's new developments

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| 1. Palisade Gardens condo conversion | 7. Play Street Arts District improvements |
| 2. Theater Park | 8. Dan Lester proposed condo-shop-library |
| 3. North Park Theatre | 9. Slicks Group proposed condo |
| 4. 20th Street theater plaza | 10. San Diego National Bank parking garage |
| 5. Parking garage and retail space | 11. Wiggren's drugstore |
| 6. La Boheme Condos | 12. North Park Fourth Park |

SOURCE: North Park Business Improvement District

PETE ORLANDO/VOICE-TALKIE

[North Park's new developments](#)

"The fussiest picture fan is destined to enjoy the show in perfect comfort," read a San Diego Union caption of a photo of the theater's elaborately designed interior.



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune
Architect Steve Bundy, son of project architect Richard Bundy, checked the reinstallation of the remaining original seats in the auditorium.

Within nine months, the stock market crashed, and North Park's development stalled. After World War II, farther-flung suburbs sprouted up along freeway routes, and regional malls robbed neighborhood shops of their customers. North Park's decline seemed irreversible with the opening of Mission Valley shopping centers in the 1960s. The movie theater converted to church use in the 1970s and went dark in the '80s.

But with the return to the city of residents seeking shorter commutes, home prices began rising in the 1990s. In July, North Park's median resale house price stood at \$550,000, up 19.6 percent from a year earlier. New businesses and investors are now following.

A continuing story

Other coming attractions in the North Park business district, in addition to the condo projects planned by Ito and Sickels include:

La Boheme, 224 condos at 30th and University by D.R. Horton, the nation's largest home builder. A spokeswoman said 70 homes have been sold so far, and prices range from \$389,000 to \$730,000 on floor plans of 694 to 1,507 square feet. The project will include 45 moderate-income units with buyers' resale options regulated by the city of San Diego. Completion is expected next September.

Walgreen's drugstore, developed by KZ Holdings Co. of Orange County, at University and 32nd Street on the site of a former tire and 99-cent store that burned down several years ago. Completion is expected next March, along with a welcome-to-North Park sign at a corner of the property.

A larger North Park library branch is in the works, possibly as part of a mixed-use project proposed by Dan Liewer between 31st and Grim south of University. Mike Jenkins, Liewer's consultant, said seven lots acquired so far could accommodate the library as well as about 120 condos, six stores and other improvements.

Public improvements in the planning stages include:

\$2 million in new medians and specially designed crosswalks for about six blocks along University and surrounding streets.

Street signs redesigned to resemble the chevron-styled North Park sign, reinstalled on University in 1993 after a 27-year absence.

A park on the south side of the North Park Theatre.

The 393-space parking garage opposite the theater on 29th Street, developed by Fischer and due to open by January. Overflow theater parking will be handled by shuttle from Balboa Park lots, under present plans.

Wider sidewalks and a promenade treatment of 29th Street next to the theater. Improved streetscape on University between Granada and 28th streets. Similar improvements have already been installed on Ray Street to tie into the budding art district's monthly night-time events.

Back to the park

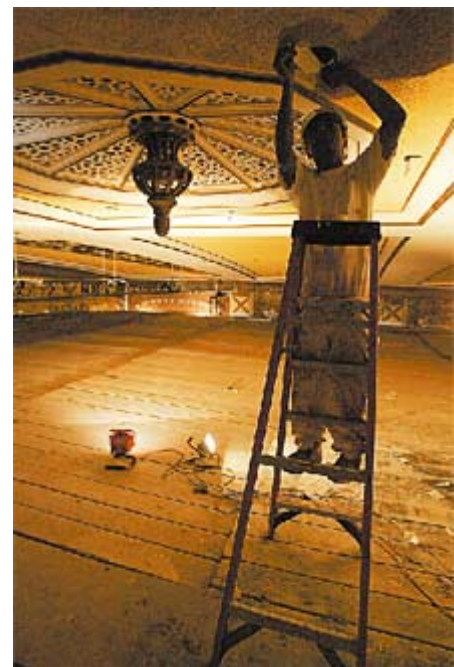
Turner said the North Park improvements represent the first results of his group's City of Villages pilot village plan, accepted by the City Council two years ago as a demonstration of how densification can occur along with neighborhood revitalization and beautification.

"We have more projects than any other (pilot) village," Turner said. "Others are single-development villages. We're multidevelopment villages."

As for the North Park Theatre, it is becoming the home of the Lyric Opera San Diego, which plans a gala reopening Sept. 30 and the first production, "The Mikado," Oct. 14.

The San Diego Cinema Society wants to screen the theater's first film sometime in October, according to its director, Andy Friedenberg, who said he hopes to install projection equipment rescued from the long-gone Unicorn Theatre in La Jolla.

"We're looking to do a premiere there," Friedenberg said. "Ideally, I'd like to take advantage of the stage as well as the screen. It's like big-time, great!" Leon Natker, general director of the Lyric Opera, said moving from the Casa del Prado Theatre in Balboa Park should be popular with his subscribers because of improved parking. But he said the theater's opening sends other signals.



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Arturo Avila of Quality Painting and Wall Coverings masked and then painted the theater ceiling last May. Workers operated from a scaffolding they called the "dance floor."

"There's more of an urban mentality about San Diego than there was," he said, recalling attitudes he encountered when he arrived in 1986. "Everybody lived in the car, went to the mall – there was no feel for neighborhood."

For Craig Noel, 90-year-old founding director of the Old Globe, memories go back much further.

"That was my theater," he said, recalling his teenage years in the 1930s. "Little kids don't pay much attention to a building – they just go to the movies."

But having seen the magic of theater spur revitalization from 42nd Street in New York City to downtowns all over America, he thinks North Park is in for some pleasant surprises as the North Park Theatre's lights go back on.

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