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Community News

Loew's Pitkin, Famed Movie Palace, To Get New Life

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From 'Wonder Theater' To Charter School

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BROWNSVILLE — Once, the building at 1501 Pitkin Ave. was the opulent Loew's Pitkin, a 2,827-seat theater designed for both movies and stage shows.

Now, after years of blight, it will be transformed into the new home for the Ascend Charter School, with stores on the ground floor. The $45 million project should be finished within 18 months, according to Ken Olson, CEO of Poko Partners, the owner and developer.

According to the Museum of Family History's web site, the Mayan-styled theater opened on Nov. 23, 1929 with So This Is College, an "all-talking, all singing" musical. The Pitkin was designed by Thomas W. Lamb, who designed many of the other ornate theaters in the Loew's chain.

The Pitkin was advertised in the Brooklyn Eagle as a "wonder theater," although nowadays theater historians reserve that designation for five other Loew's theaters in the metropolitan area.

Robert Taylor and George Raft were the stars when the Loew's Pitkin in Brownsville was showing Rogue Cop in 1949.
Photo courtesy of Brooklyn Public Library's Brooklyn collection

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In addition to movies, the web site says that it also presented live vaudeville shows, even after vaudeville had faded away in most other venues. "It played the top-tier movies immediately after their New York debut," the Museum of Family History says.

The site also mentions "the ever-present Henrieta Kamern at the organ," who accompanied "follow the bouncing ball" sing-alongs at the beginning and the end of major features.

Pitkin Avenue in those days was a major, although working-class, shopping center. Jackie Gleason mentioned it on his show, and a famous commercial for Joe and Paul's clothing store on Yiddish radio in the 1930s proudly advertised that it was located "on Pitkin Avenue, Brownsville, Brooklyn."

In the early 1960s, the theater itself gained an unwitting notoriety. Police were looking for ways to trip up the maverick and sometimes foul-mouthed comedian Lenny Bruce. A police stenographer misheard a reference to the Loew's Pitkin as "Loew's tit can."

The theater closed around 1969, and over the years has suffered considerable interior damage. John Manbeck, former Brooklyn borough historian, recounts that the coming of television in the 1950s meant that people went to the movies a lot less. "Before, it was a weekly ritual — people would go the movies every Friday or every Saturday," he said. That type of communal movie-going experience still survives in some places — for example, in the "Movies With a View" outdoor movies shown at Brooklyn Bridge Park — but not often.

For many years, according to the Cinema Treasures web site, the Pitkin was a church. Later, the lobby was converted into retail space, and still later, into storage.

By the 1970s, Brownsville itself was considered a rundown, dangerous area. Olson of Poko Partners, however, said his firm specializes in investing in inner-city areas that are often avoided by other developers.

Poko, he says, bought the old theater (which is almost a dead ringer for the old Loew's 175th Street Theater in Manhattan, better known to many as the Reverend Ike's headquarters) in 2007. The company originally planned to develop it into affordable housing, but the real estate crash soon hit.

The new development is being built with financing from Goldman Sachs and a "new market" tax credit. The company, he says, is committed to hiring community residents, both in construction and in the retail stores to come.

Ascend currently has charter schools at two locations in Brooklyn." The mission of our schools," the organization says on its web site, "is to equip students from under-served communities with the knowledge, confidence and character to succeed in college and beyond."

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