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Developers Set Sights High for Victoria Theater

Plans inch along as developers prepare to renovate historic Harlem theater

By Taryn Finley

The Victoria Theater on West 125th Street looks desolate and abandoned while many neighboring buildings transform into retail businesses.

The almost century-old theater, part of what once was known as “Opera Row,” used to host cultural events and discussions that drew crowds that wrapped around the block.

Now, after being shuttered for more than a decade due to declining business, the theater is being renovated as part of a \$143 million project.

Inside, the Victoria’s once-elegant lobby with glittery chandeliers is cold and dusty, partly used as storage. Its ornate ceiling and famed grand staircase remain largely intact, but a leak has damaged other parts of its historic “palace-like interior,” as Jacob Morris, president of the Harlem Historical Society, describes it.

The Victoria was designed by Thomas W. Lamb, the leading theater architect of the 1910’s to the 1920’s. The former vaudeville palace succumbed to urban blight in the 1960s and became a movie multiplex that closed in the 1980s. But over the years, developers kept their eyes on the property.

“When we first opened up, I think it was a great thing to learn that hey, you don’t have to go to 42nd Street, 86th Street to watch a movie,” said Harold Sharp, former manager of the theater. “You had it right here in your own community.”



Today, Sharp, 65, sells trinkets on the sidewalk in front of theater. Since it's been shuttered, he still takes care of the building, now owned by Empire State Development, the state development agency.

In the air space over the theater, a 26-story high rise will become one of the tallest buildings in Harlem. The building, stretching from 125th Street to 126th Street, will include a 210-room hotel, 229 residential rental units and a cultural arts space, plus retail space and underground parking. Half the rental apartments are designated as affordable to low- and moderate-income housing, including studios and one- and two-bedroom units.

“From an architectural perspective it is a significant example of adaptive reuse, which restores to public view and use key design features of the historic Victoria Theater facade and lobby as part of new hotel and residential structures,” Ariel Aufgang, the architect behind the plan, said via email.

The project will restore the theater's south building, including the lobby, the building's façade on 125th Street, marquee and signage to preserve its history, according to Empire State Development and Harlem Community Development Corporation. The latter made Danforth Development Partners LLC the project's developers in 2007, but the project stalled during the economic downturn.

In coming months, Empire State Development and Harlem Community Development Corporation will submit a modified plan to the Public Authorities Control Board for review.

Empire State Development would not provide details about when construction will begin or when it's scheduled to be completed, but said it expects the project to create 580 construction jobs and 373 permanent jobs.

(Rendering courtesy of Harlem Community Development Corporation. Photo by Taryn Finley.)