

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

When “talkies” first hit the silver screen in the late ’20s, Eugene had five theaters (the Heilig, the Rex, the Colonial, the Eugene State Theater and the McDonald), and by 1980, more than 10 theaters lit up the town with their marquees. Today, the city is host to three theaters: the Regal Valley River Center Stadium 15, the David Minor Theater and the Bijou. Forty years after what was then called the Eugene Renewal Agency razed the Heilig — Eugene’s oldest movie theater — the Bijou Metro will open with the aid of the current Eugene Urban Renewal Agency. Unlike the controversial 12-screen multiplex that was originally proposed by the urban renewal project in the mid-aughts, the Bijou Metro will be a compact venue totaling 3,300 square feet.

Crafting an experience was on Schiessl’s mind two years ago when he started working with developer Steve Master of Master Capital Management LLC and Denny Braud and Mike Sullivan of Eugene’s Urban Renewal Agency. According to Braud, the city of Eugene is financing \$70,000 for the Bijou Metro and \$500,000 for Master Capital Management LLC to revamp the Bijou site, the former First National Bank building and later a Taco Time, through the Downtown Revitalization Loan Program (other loan benefactors coming to the block include Off The Waffle, Noisette Pastry Kitchen and The Barn Light). Braud, who describes the Bijou Metro as “the perfect project for downtown,” estimates that the city has invested about \$20 million into the Broadway area thus far.

“If X marks the spot,” Master says, pointing to the intersection of Willamette Street and Broadway Avenue, “this is the best corner in Eugene. It just doesn’t get better than this.”

Standing on the first floor of the gutted 19th-century bank building, Master’s voice is barely audible over the cacophony of drills and hammers working overhead on 16 luxury apartments, also owned by Master. “This is going to be the First National Tap House,” he says, patting a cobbled brick wall. Master and business partner developer Tim Weiskind (their other projects include the Park Place

apartments downtown) are looking to collaborate with the Metro. “We’re going to do a projector on the wall and Ed is going to supply us with old movies to play.”

There will also be a digital reader board alerting beer-sipping patrons that their movie is about to start across the hall and a full, mobile kitchen specializing in gourmet burgers with indoor and outdoor seating. Handsome copper bank vault doors (weighing several tons each) will be pulled from the basement for a display behind the bar.

Master slides his shoe across the floor, revealing the original marbled tiles hidden by construction dust. “It’s stone from the original bank,” he says. Built in 1886, the Bristow building, which became first National Bank in 1898, was the first brick building in Eugene. He and Schiessl want to leave much of the original stone and brickwork in place. They outline the 20-seat theater that will be on Broadway across from the incoming Sizzle Pie, a Portland-based pizzeria chain. The three other auditoriums will be on the northern side of the site. Each theater will have stadium seating and digital projection with screens ranging from 14 to 22 feet. The two larger auditoriums will also have 16mm and 35mm projection capabilities for archival film.

With true art house flair, the décor will be inspired by the Art Nouveau design of the Paris Metro. The theater’s sign will closely mimic the curling wrought iron lines and red background of its French counterpart. “We’re going for that fancy underground look,” Schiessl says. Local neon artist Neal Conner of Neon Latitudes will be helping with interior design and signage. And in keeping with the French theme, wine, beer and some *amuse-bouches* are in order — all of which will be available at concessions (with popcorn, of course.) The Bijou is working with a local chef to design a menu that will include seasonal variety of hand-made gourmet sandwiches, grilled paninis, salads, soups and other specialties, featuring locally sourced natural ingredients, along with artisan spices and sauces. Eventually the wine, beer and food menu will be available at the original Bijou as soon as the Oregon Liquor Control Commission gives the go-ahead.

“We have a few more hoops to jump through than the David Minor Theater because we are not 21 and older,” Schiessl says. He emphasizes there will be no text-a-beer service. “We are certainly building this to be a movie theater where you can also get a beer, rather than a bar where you can see a movie. We don’t want cell phones. We don’t want talking. We’re thinking about even adopting a policy like the Alamo Drafthouse where it’s like, if you talk, you text, you’re out of here. We don’t want people to opt for home video instead of coming to see a movie just because there are people talking.”

DUDE, AT LEAST IT’S AN ETHOS

The Bijou is “booking their own films. I think it makes a fabulous difference,” says former *EW* film critic Lois Wadsworth. She explains that programming for most theaters, i.e. the ubiquitous multiplex, is done on a national scale by a booker who has no ties to the local communities where the films play. “They know the Eugene audience. They live here,” Wadsworth says. “I can’t tell you about booking; I can just tell you it’s the part that matters.”

During the majority of the Bijou’s lifespan, original owner Michael Lamont worked with Portland-based booker Roger Paulson of Paulson Theater Services. Schiessl took over film booking at the end of 2010, three years after Lamont died. “Roger was a great resource as I got on my feet and helped me make the necessary contacts when I began booking the theater. There are certainly benefits to having a professional film buyer, in terms of their clout in being able to get product from large distributors, and we may employ one again in the future,” Schiessl says. For now, he enjoys responding to Bijou customer requests and tailoring the films to a local audience, which is paying off as the theater is seeing the first box office rise since 2005. Programming, however, can be tricky, and the myriad requirements of film distributors add significantly to the need for a second theater.

“The way our business is right now, we have to make these lose-lose choices almost every week. Do we hang on to a movie that’s moderately successful and try to exploit second, third and fourth week audiences on it or hope it

DIGITAL RENDERING OF THE PLANS FOR THE NEW BIJOU METRO



DIGITAL RENDERING COURTESY MASTER CAPITAL MANAGEMENT