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Life from Mars: Springfield Theatre Renovation Sparks Revitalization

Barton Alderman will never forget those Saturday afternoons of his youth in Springfield, Ga.

He and his friends would stop at a downtown gas station, where the owner would count out six bottle caps for each child. Then they headed next door, to the Mars Theatre, where the bottle caps gained them admission to the Saturday matinee. Young Barton watched westerns, newsreels, cartoons and such classics as “Gone With the Wind.”

Unfortunately, he would not enjoy that Saturday ritual for long. Like many small-town movie houses that lost patrons from declining populations, rising multiplexes and the advent of television, the Mars Theatre closed its doors in 1957. Shortly thereafter, a drive-in theatre three miles away also closed. Soon, the city of Springfield was on a downward economic spiral, culminating with the opening of discount retailers in surrounding cities in the mid-1990s.

“People got into the habit of leaving Springfield to get what they needed,” says Alderman, a lifelong Springfield resident and the city’s mayor on and off since 2003. “Businesses just couldn’t last and started shutting down. No one came downtown any more.” But all that is changing.

In April 2014, 57 years after the closing of the Mars Theatre, Barton Alderman once again attended an event there – the venue’s grand re-opening.



A Place “Where History Plays On”

It wasn’t the first time the Mars had seen life since its Eisenhower-era shuttering. In the 1970s, the lobby of the theatre was converted into office space; over the years, it served as home to an attorney’s office, florist, fabric store and bank. The main theatre, however, remained unused.

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– Brett Bennett, City Manager, Springfield



In the late 1990s, a group of residents formed the Springfield Revitalization Corporation (SRC) and leased the dilapidated theatre to prevent it from being torn down. In 2007, SRC bought the building and started raising funds to restore it. While the group was able to make some minor improvements to the facade, SRC struggled financially over the years, especially during the recession.

The city bought the building from SRC in 2010 thinking they could renovate it enough to be rented out. After the leaky roof was repaired, the city decided to move forward with a full renovation, hoping to create a chain reaction that would revitalize the city.

“A thriving downtown is all about getting people out there at night,” says Alderman. “The success of

the theatre would necessitate the addition of new restaurants and businesses downtown.”

For the theatre to be successful, though, it had to be done right. At a weekend retreat in 2012, the city council – some of whom were not entirely on board with the project at that point – made a commitment not just to restore the Mars Theatre but to do it “first class.” That meant investing in quality construction and state-of-the-art sound, lighting and projection equipment. “Going to the theatre had to be a pleasing experience right off the bat, from the sound to the temperature and right down to the popcorn,” Alderman says. “As the saying goes, you only get one chance to make a first impression.”

The project cost just under \$1 million, with most of it coming from city funds. Alderman says that had the city not stepped in and rebuilt the theatre, there would just be an empty lot sitting in downtown Springfield. While city officials could oversee the renovations, they didn’t know anything about running a theatre. At the advice of City Manager Brett Bennett, they hired an expert.

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– Tommy Deadwyler, Cultural Affairs Director, Springfield

“I told the City Council that if we expect the theatre to have an impact in economic development, we can’t just renovate the building in hopes that people will use it,” Bennett says. “If it’s going to have that impact, it must have regular programming and a director who will be responsible for promoting as well.”

Enter Tommy Deadwyler, an event producer who visited Springfield in May 2013 when he ran the Georgia Presenters Network for the Fox Theatre Institute.

He was hired and oversaw everything from the lighting to the sound to the seating.

“Tommy came on board during construction and played an integral role in developing the finished product,” Bennett says. “Had we not had his insight, it would not have the economic viability that it has.”

Beyond overseeing the theatre renovation, Deadwyler was named director of cultural affairs, a somewhat rare position for such a small city, and another sign of Springfield’s commitment to use the arts to put itself on an upward trajectory.

“Taking this job was a tremendous opportunity,” Deadwyler recalls. “It was a chance to make an impact on a community that was dedicated to bringing back local theatre and using arts, culture and heritage to revitalize the city.”

Beyond creating what he calls “an extraordinary experience” for patrons, Deadwyler sets up programming that appeals to a broad audience and brings people into the theatre not just on weekends, but also for live performances throughout the week. Beer and wine are sold at the live performances when adult audiences are in attendance.

“You need to not only offer something for everyone, but you also need to be in tune with what the community will support,” he says. To generate ticket sales, he hired a marketing company to spread the word outside of Springfield.

Within months after the theatre’s reopening, the strategies appeared to be working. The 250-seat theatre brings in as many as 500 patrons for first-run and classic movies on weekends and hundreds more for live performances throughout the week.

In an act of foresight, renovations included creating outdoor access to the bathroom facilities, with a wall separating the space from the theatre. This facilitates large crowds such as the 9,000 people who come to the annual Springfield Fall Festival in October, as well as future events. The city also hopes to revisit its alcohol



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ordinances, such as allowing beer and wine sales outside like they do at the festival, as well as selling locally made beer and wine.

And Springfield is seeing signs of new life and progress. By the end of 2014, four new businesses had opened in downtown Springfield, while existing businesses began extending operating hours to accommodate evening shoppers.

Creating a Downtown Where People Want to Be

As the cornerstone of Springfield's revitalization, the Mars Theatre ties into a broader plan to get both residents and visitors into downtown Springfield. But city officials realize that they can't depend solely on the Mars Theatre to turn downtown around.

Before the renovation project, the city spent \$1 million on a streetscape project. "Updating the sidewalks and lamp posts is not going to bring people to downtown," Bennett acknowledges, "But once we have a way to bring people here, it's important that it looks nice."

In addition, Bennett contacted the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) and had interior design, graphic design and historic preservation students design a master plan for downtown, create plans to revitalize City Hall, conduct historic property surveys and work on other projects. The SCAD students provided their services and skill for little or no cost.

The city would eventually like to turn the current City Hall building, once home to a Ford dealership, into a multi-use event space. Plans created by SCAD students include transforming the parking lot into a garden, and adding a gallery.

In December 2014, the city acquired 275 acres at historic Ebenezer Creek, which includes two miles of rivers and streams where the creek meets the Savannah River. It's become a popular destination for kayaking and canoeing, and the city is hoping the outdoor lovers will stay awhile after their adventures.



"Right now they paddle the creek and go home," says Bennett. "We're working to give them more reasons to visit downtown."

While Springfield still has a ways to go in its revitalization, the city has created forward momentum that it hopes will lead others to take the initiative.

"I'm convinced that when business owners see the city taking the lead and running with it, they'll jump on board," Bennett says. "The people in the community are more open-minded and optimistic that we can make something happen. There is a sense of pride in the community."

No one felt that sense of pride and optimism more than Barton Alderman on the night the Mars Theatre reopened.

"I was absolutely speechless," he says. "Being in the theatre brought back so many memories. It's worth every penny we've spent."