

The New York Times

Kings Theater in Flatbush Set to Reopen, and Lift a Neighborhood

By JANE L. LEVERE

DEC. 30, 2014

Link: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/31/realestate/commercial/kings-theater-in-flatbush-set-to-reopen-and-lift-a-neighborhood.html>

A jewel of the golden age of the [New York City](#) movie theater is being revived, with the reopening in February of the former Loews Kings Theater on Flatbush Avenue in [Brooklyn](#).

Opened in 1929 as one of five Loews metropolitan area “[wonder theaters](#),” Kings Theater, now owned by the City of New York, is undergoing a \$95 million transformation into a high-tech, multipurpose performing arts center that is already stimulating new development in the neighborhood.

The theater, at 1027 Flatbush Avenue, is a short walk from the Q, B, 2 and 5 subway lines. A Gap Factory recently opened directly across the street in a building owned by Solil Management at 1016 Flatbush Avenue, while a Crunch gym and a 69-room boutique hotel are scheduled to open nearby within the next two years.

According to Benjamin M. Branham, executive vice president of the City Economic Development Corporation, which has [overseen renovation](#) of Kings Theater, the number of businesses in Flatbush — a central Brooklyn neighborhood with a population of 100,000 — grew 34 percent between 2000 and 2012, compared with citywide growth of 11 percent. In the same period, he said, jobs in Flatbush grew 7 percent, compared with 4 percent citywide.

“This told us it is a very attractive place for a cultural destination,” he said.

Kings Theater was one of five “wonder theaters” in New York and [New Jersey](#) built in 1929 and 1930 by the Loews movie theater chain. The Kings, designed by the architectural firm Rapp & Rapp, had interiors by the Rambusch Company that were inspired by the Palace of Versailles and Paris Opera House. With its reopening, four of the theaters — the Jersey, in Jersey City; the Paradise, in the [Bronx](#); the 175th Street Theater, in Upper Manhattan; and the Kings — will be used for entertainment. The fifth, the Valencia in Jamaica, [Queens](#), [is now a church](#).

Closed in 1977, Kings Theater was seized for back taxes in 1983 by the city, which made some structural repairs. For years the theater remained vacant, while it deteriorated from a leaking

roof, water damage and vandalism. The city considered a variety of proposals to revive it, including [a 1999 plan](#) by Magic Johnson to convert it into a 12-screen multiplex.

In 2012, the city chose [ACE Theatrical Group](#), a Houston-based theatrical management and development company, to restore Kings Theater and operate it, on a self-sustaining, for-profit basis. ACE has restored and operates historical theaters in once-blighted urban areas, like the Boston Opera House and the Hippodrome Theater at the [France-Merrick Performing Arts Center](#) in Baltimore.

Working with ACE at Kings Theater, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2012, is [Martinez & Johnson Architecture](#), a specialist in restoration of theaters.

More than half the project's funding comes from public coffers: The Bloomberg administration allocated \$20.5 million to it, the Brooklyn borough president \$30.5 million, the City Council \$1.5 million and the state \$3 million. Goldman Sachs's [Urban Investment Group](#) has invested \$21.6 million in the project, and ACE, \$18.3 million.

A major part of [the theater's refurbishment](#) involves restoration and recreation of its original décor. Its terra-cotta facade and marquee have been repaired and partly replaced; the American walnut paneling in its elaborate, 70-foot-high inner lobby has been cleaned and refinished; and carpeting, draperies and light fixtures have been replaced, replicating originals wherever possible. Parts of the original interior, including plaster figures and other decoration, and the inner lobby's crystal chandeliers have been refurbished.

Some of the most significant changes are in the theater itself. It will seat 3,250, down from the original 3,600 seats, with three-quarters of the seats in the orchestra and one-quarter in the balcony. When it reopens, the theater will be New York's third largest, after Radio City Music Hall and the Theater at Madison Square Garden, and exceed in capacity the Howard Gilman Opera House at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Seating in the theater has been updated and realigned to improve sightlines, while new acoustics and lighting systems have also been installed. The stage has been modernized, and a new stage house, with dressing and loading areas, has been added at the rear.

David M. Anderson, chief executive of ACE, described the project as a "three-legged stool," involving "restoration of an iconic piece of architecture," creation of jobs and revitalization of the neighborhood.

Mr. Anderson predicts the theater will create the equivalent of approximately 100 full-time jobs. He and the City Economic Development Corporation also believe it will spur economic development beyond the new Gap Factory, Crunch gym and boutique hotel. The hotel, which is being developed by the Brooklyn-based SY Group I, will have 69 rooms on Floors 2 through 7, and a 3,000- to 4,000-square-foot restaurant on the ground floor, said Joseph Sardor, president of SY Group I.

"When you see people investing in a neighborhood — be first movers — others will follow," said Margaret Anadu, a managing director of Goldman Sachs who oversees the Urban Investment Group's investments in New York and New Jersey.

She said there had “very clearly been a catalytic impact in terms of continuing development” near other projects the group has invested in, including the Bradford, a mixed-use development at 1560 Fulton Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and [Teachers Village](#) in Newark.

A study released in mid-November by the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership estimated that in 2013, 36 of the 60 cultural institutions in the Brooklyn Cultural District generated nearly \$310 million in economic activity.

Karen Brooks Hopkins, president of BAM, which is in the district, said: “I believe when a community embraces a cultural institution and gets involved, then there’s tremendous economic reward for everyone. If the programming at Kings Theater is anywhere near the level of renovation, it will have a fantastic impact on the neighborhood.”

Kings Theater will be “a catalyst for economic development along Flatbush Avenue,” said Marty Markowitz, the former Brooklyn borough president. “There’s no doubt restaurants will come back.” Mr. Markowitz began fighting in the 1970s, initially as co-founder of the Flatbush Development Corporation, to save the theater, the first place he “took a girl on a date alone.”

Currently vice president for borough promotion and engagement for NYC & Company, the city’s tourism marketing agency, Mr. Markowitz predicted tourists “will go wild over the job they did inside.” He also predicted the theater would be used as a set for television productions and for high school graduations, as it often was in the past.

Kings Theater, he added, will be “Brooklyn’s Beacon and Apollo theaters all in one.” It’s an apt analogy, since an Apollo favorite, [Diana Ross](#), will perform at Kings Theater’s first concert when it reopens Feb. 3.