

\$12.5 million Capri Theater renovation pinned as linchpin to north Minneapolis revitalization

A \$12.5 million expansion of the Capri Theater promises to help with the revitalization of north Minneapolis.

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OCTOBER 22, 2019 — 5:22AM

Like the mythical Sankofa bird that looks at its past in order to go forward, the Capri Theater in north Minneapolis is literally and figuratively building on its storied history for the promise of community renewal.

Community leaders gathered last Thursday at the theater, where Prince had his first solo concert in 1979, to break ground on a 20,000-square-foot, \$12.5 million wraparound renovation and expansion that's expected to be completed in October 2020.

Young performers Imani Harris and Ramiyah Jackson, who attended an arts summer camp at the playhouse on Broadway, sang "O, Freedom" as philanthropic, corporate and government leaders applauded.

"There's a lot of symbolism in this event because this community is literally rising again," said Anne Long, longtime executive director of Plymouth Christian Youth Center (PCYC), which owns the Capri. The theater is one of three legs of the Christian agency, which also runs an alternative high school and an after-school program.

Designed by Minneapolis-based architecture firm Baker Associates, best known for creating car showrooms for the likes of Porsche and Jaguar, and built by D.J. Kranz Co. of Plymouth, the expansion includes renovation of the 250-seat main Capri auditorium with new backstage and dressing room areas.

A scene shop, a flexible performance hall that accommodates 100 and a Best Buy tech teen center — where young people can do everything from edit movies and record albums to 3-D printing — also are part of the renovations.

"This has been a long time coming, but they have been dedicated and steadfast," said Reatha Clark King, former vice president of General Mills and retired president of the General Mills Foundation and Metropolitan State University. As head of the foundation, she authorized a \$300,000 donation to the Capri in 1988, the first of many gifts.

"This is providing the platform to develop great talent and give young people ways to have a voice," actor and arts teacher Dennis Spears said. "Young people have a lot to say, and when they don't have creative outlets to say it, they get frustrated, which explains some violence."

When completed, the facility also will include galleries, a dance studio and classrooms.

"For too long, this has been a drive-through culture," Capri director James Scott said. "We want this place to be a destination again."

That vision would return the street life to what it was a half-century ago when Broadway was one of the most vibrant commercial and cultural arteries outside of downtown Minneapolis. That was before white flight, urban renewal and a host of



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Visitors toured the Capri Theater, where Prince had his first solo concert in 1979, as the theater broke ground on a renovation and expansion that's expected to be completed next fall.



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Ramiyah Jackson, left, and Imani Harris, who sang early in the program, donned hardhats for a photo during the groundbreaking ceremony.

social challenges muddled that vitality.

The North Side has been making fitful progress over the past two decades, with community radio station KMOJ, Juxtaposition Arts, Homewood Studios and the Northside Achievement Zone serving as neighborhood anchors.

“This has been a great resource for the community,” said George Roberts, owner of Homewood Studios and a former teacher at North High School from 1970-2001. “Kids who struggled at North High found success here, and now there’ll be more opportunities for that.”

Support from sources such as Best Buy and the Pohlad Family Foundation have contributed to the Capri’s success.

“This is an investment in a place, but it’s as much about investing in the people,” said Susan Bass Roberts, who was in charge of Best Buy’s philanthropic programs before becoming executive director of the Pohlad foundation.

The effort also had consistent government support. The Capri raised more than \$7 million privately, Long said. With great help from the city of Minneapolis, it closed on over \$2 million in tax credits two days before the groundbreaking. And it’s still seeking to raise more than \$1 million to complete the effort.

Attendees included Council Member Jeremiah Ellison, Hennepin County Commissioner Irene Fernando, former Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, and current Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey.

At the groundbreaking, Frey nodded to the Prince concert: “Tickets were — guess how much? \$4.”

Those making pilgrimages to Prince touchstones will want to stand on the Capri stage. The floorboards are the same ones from 1979.

Visual artist Heidi Jeub — whose great-grandfather Herman Jeub built the original theater, which opened as a vaudeville house in 1927 — also attended the ceremony, choking back tears. The family operated a store and lived in the same building just as the Depression hit.

“It is so emotional to be here right now,” Jeub said, as she collected original bricks that she intends to use for an art project with neighborhood storyteller Beverly Cottman. “I have an appreciation of the history but also an understanding of the changes that have happened since then.”

The only surviving vaudeville house of 13 theaters on Minneapolis’ North Side, the Capri has seen many names and changes over the years. Once the Paradise Theater, it was given its current name after a 1966 remodeling. The Wheelock Whitney Foundation donated the theater to PCYC in 1984. It was remodeled in 1993 and had a \$700,000 refurbishment in 2009.

PCYC announced plans for a more ambitious renovation during the Great Recession. However, those dreams were put on hold for a decade while Long, her board and supporters worked quietly to bring them to fruition. Now that vision has folks excited.

“The Capri has been great in the past as an anchor and major cultural attraction in the neighborhood,” said Don Samuels, a former City Council member who lives just blocks away. “But it’s never been as grand or as big as what it’s now going to be. This is a true renaissance.”



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The exterior sign of the Capri Theater remained untouched last week as work continued inside.