

Curtain Rising on Cinema

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The Providence Journal / Kathy Borchers

CRANSTON — From the outside, the former Park Theater looks pretty much the way it always did. The stucco façade still juts out at the corner of Park and Pontiac avenues, showing off art-deco angles and copper masonry that long ago became neighborhood fixtures. The ticket window still faces the sidewalk, lending an air of invitation to one of the city's best-known landmarks.

Oh, but inside this storied building, there is a lot that has changed.

Where there was once one floor, now there are two. Where there was once a row of shops, there is a café, a lounge and a restaurant. Where there was once dirt and a basement, there is a generous spread of cast dressing rooms. Where there were once walls that divided the theater for three movie screens, there is a stage with the height and floor space needed to put on full-scale plays and productions.

The changes came not from any grand scheme but through a slow process of trial and error.

Owner Piyush Patel bought the theater 10 years ago for \$300,000, thinking he would transform what had long been a second-run cinema into a draw for the latest releases. Two years later, as he realized the challenge of competing with modern mega cinemas, he tried to sell. When that didn't work, he changed direction and started talking about a dinner theater.

Only now, after many false starts and nearly \$12 million in renovations (by his count), is he planning to open — most likely in early to mid-October.

If things go well, he envisions a smaller version of the Providence Performing Arts Center, one with a restaurant and bars and music and dancing and comedy — an all-round mix that brings life back to the building and brings people back to the closest thing that Cranston has to a central downtown.



Owner Piyush Patel in the recently opened Park Café in Cranston. The rest of the renovated Park Cinema is expected to open in October.

"It is a total facility," he says. "We can do theatrical concerts, have large-screen sporting events, have an orchestra. We can do almost anything."

To come this far, Patel, 69, has cleared many hurdles.

One of the biggest was getting a special exemption from the [General Assembly](#) to obtain a liquor license. The theater, located across the street from City Hall, is also within 200 feet of one of the city's high schools. As a result, his license forbids the serving of alcohol before 5 p.m.

Patel also worked out a no-cost lease arrangement that will allow theater patrons to park behind City Hall.

And though the theater is not in a historic district, Patel agreed to work with the city's Historic District Commission, meeting board specifications for the exterior.

"We had people saying to us, 'don't change it,' says Commission Chairman Stephen Torregrossa.

City officials say they support Patel's plan and welcome it as a potential anchor for the faded Rolfe Square business district — as long as Patel runs a respectable, upscale operation.

There was some concern about that two weeks ago when the already-finished café and the adjacent lounge opened for business, and a third-party ad for the lounge appeared in a local weekly. The ad showed a scantily clad woman, says City Councilman Richard D. Santamaria Jr., prompting questions about whether Patel's vision and the city's still matched.

Santamaria and [Mayor Allan W. Fung](#) met with Patel and were told that the ad was a mistake, Santamaria says.

Marketing mishaps aside, a recent walk through the theater suggests that Patel has not minced on details.

The upstairs restaurant is lined with hardwood floors, the central elevator is lined with mahogany and brass, the lobbies are lined with television screens so theatergoers who get up to buy drinks or use the spacious restrooms won't miss too much action. In the theater, where renovations continue, there is now a balcony, raising the capacity to 1,150.

Patel says about a quarter of his costs were covered by a Small Business Administration loan. The rest, he says, came from his own pocket.

After so much investment, he says he plans to make good by drawing first-rate shows, productions and concerts. He has theater people on staff and says he is talking with a Boston theater about cosponsoring productions.

"I think we have a business plan that is going to work," he says.

Patel is no stranger to the business world. A native of India, he has interests in personal-care products, computer software, hotels and industrial-waste treatment. He also owns a catering business in Westerly and a small cinema, now closed, in Narragansett.

The cinema is closed, he says, because the small ones simply can't compete — a conclusion that seems to be borne out by the Park Theater's own history.

Built in 1923 and 1924, the theater drew some small stage productions but functioned mostly as a movie house, enjoying its greatest success in the days before television, according to stories in The Journal archives.

By 1963, the owners were seeking permission to raze the building to make way for a gas station. A neighborhood petition drive helped to stop the plan. The Park Cinema, as it was then known, closed the following year but reopened in March 1965 under new management.

Fung, aware of the long history, recalls seeing his first movie — Star Wars — at the former cinema during the late 1970s. He is among those who see promise, not only for the theater, but nearby merchants.

"I think a lot of businesses are going to see the impact, that there is a business operating in that area," he says. "Hopefully that will lead to more businesses considering the Rolfe Square area."

For that to happen, the theater will have to once again draw people through its doors, into the historic yet all-new setting that Patel has created.

As Torregrossa puts it: "Everything's changed except the canopy."

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