Capitol Theatre Redevelopment Project

Fall River, MA

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Introduction: A Theatre for Fall River

Fall River is a city of 90,000 on the southern coast of Massachusetts, fifty miles south of Boston. Once a thriving industrial city, it has been in economic decline since the last of its textile mills closed nearly eighty years ago. The city has declared bankruptcy twice in the past century and suffers from high unemployment and a median income of only $30,000. A proposed commuter rail line from Boston offers hope for an economic rebirth, though whether the station will be located in the more affluent north end of the city or downtown is still undecided.

Built in 1926 the Capitol Theatre is located in the center of downtown near the intersection of South Main and Columbia Streets. If the proposed rail station is built downtown Columbia Street will be the main access route to downtown for visitors disembarking from the train. Across Morgan Street from the back of the theatre is the N.B. Borden Elementary School, a nineteenth century schoolhouse that has been put up for sale by the city. This structure is ideally situated to house educational programs that would work with a revitalized Capitol Theatre to connect with the community and improve arts literacy among the city’s youth.

My goals for the project are to redevelop the Capitol Theatre and surrounding buildings as an arts district that will revitalize the South Main Street area through the development of office, retail, and entertainment establishments centered around a performing arts complex. I hope to restore the street facade on South Main Street by reopening the main entrance to the theatre and redeveloping the lot directly across from it as a new parking structure with street-level retail, making the Capitol Theatre block the hub of southern downtown.

The site plan is organized by two circulation axes crossing the site, one from the entry on South Main Street and the other from the Borden School. Renovating the abandoned Firehouse adjacent to the theatre into a Great Hall will activate the first axis, and the construction of a glass atrium at the rear of the theatre on Morgan Street will activate the second. The Morgan Street Atrium will provide views into the new stage shop, transforming the construction of sets into a form of performance and allowing for educational tours “behind-the-scenes” of working theatre. The Modern Furniture building on the other side of the Firehouse will be reconfigured to house a black box Studio Theatre to provide an additional performance space, as well as leasable retail and office space to provide income.

The project is designed to be implemented in phases as funding becomes available. Phase one will begin with the rehabilitation of the theatre and construction of the Morgan Street Atrium, along with organizing the fragmented lots on the interior of the lot into a unified lot for surface parking. The Borden School will be acquired from the city, perhaps in partnership with one or more non-profit groups, so that it can be renovated into an arts education facility. After the theatre re-opens, fundraising can begin for phase two, which will see the transformation of the Firehouse and Modern Furniture buildings and construction of the new parking structure on South Main Street, hopefully with the help of the city.

It is my hope that this plan to redevelop the Capitol Theatre will benefit the city of Fall River by revitalizing the southern downtown district around the intersection of South Main and Columbia Streets into a thriving regional district for arts & commerce. A performing arts center in Fall River would bring touring artists and productions to the community, and provide performance space for local performers and groups. Including a facility for educational programs will improve arts education in the community and engage children and families in activities at the arts center. The performances spaces and grand lobby will create a gathering space in downtown for community events like holiday parties, weddings, and school graduations. Most importantly, it will give the city something all of its residents can be proud of, a local success to inspire them and remind them what Fall River can be.
