

## Superheroes reopen the Marina Theater

By Jim Maxwell

On May 2, the Marina Theater reopened with the action-hero blockbuster *Iron Man*, but it was the efforts of some superheroes behind the scenes that saved this neighborhood treasure from closing forever. The theater is now part of Lee Neighborhood Theaters, run by Frank and Lida Lee, who also own and operate the Presidio Theater on Chestnut and the 4 Star Cinema in the Richmond.

The Marina Theater first opened September 21, 1928, as a second-run movie house. The theater was an elegant Moorish-style creation, much of which was covered over when the building was extensively remodeled in 1952. In the late 50s and early 60s, the Marina Theater was renamed Cinema 21 and changed from presenting second-run films to showcasing first-run movies, including exclusive runs of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?*, *Rosemary's Baby*, and the reserved-seat, road show attraction of *Hello Dolly*. As multiplexes rose in San Francisco, first-run films were no longer exclusive to single-screen theaters, and Cinema 21 quietly closed its doors on September 20, 2001.

At that time, plans were developed to replace the theater with Walgreens, which already resided next door. Property owner Louis Kaliski cited the large theater space as only being useful for a retail store, as economics of operating a neighborhood theater no longer worked in the age of multiplexes and DVDs. However, the immediate downturn in business experienced by many local merchants after the theater closed spurred the Marina Merchants Association (MMA) to file an appeal against the proposed Walgreens store. The MMA urged the S.F. Planning Commission to consider alternative ways to preserve the theater.

In that same year, the National Trust for Historic Preservation said historic cinema houses nationwide were imperiled, but focused specifically on the rapid decline of neighborhood movie houses in San Francisco, while pointing out strategies that other cities had employed to save theaters. Unfortunately, despite the obvious benefit the theater had provided the neighborhood, many were divided on the issue. One advocate for the theater even changed sides during the course of the hearings on the theater closure, stating she felt "that the neighborhood will end up with a vacant building that will

be boarded up."

Indeed, that was what happened for a time, until another superhero came to the rescue: the San Francisco Neighborhood Theater Foundation (SFNTF), which was formed in part because of the National Trust's findings and the many theater closures that were happening citywide. The S.F. Planning Commission upheld the MMA's appeal, in large part because the SFNTF was so determined to seek an alternative way to keep the theater open. "Of all cities, San Francisco should be able to find a way to keep these theaters," said Alfonso Felder, a vice president of the San Francisco

Giants and president of the SFNTF at that time. While a few years passed before a compromise could be reached, Felder and the Theater Foundation continued to look at new ways to preserve the theater and provide for the landlord's economic needs. At a meeting among property owner

Ray Kaliski (Louis's son), the SFNTF, the MMA, and theater operator Frank Lee, an idea to allow Walgreens to move into the ground floor space of the Cinema 21 building while preserving two theaters on the balcony level was discussed, and it was agreed that all parties would work together to evaluate such a plan. In 2003, the Foundation retained the services of MK Think Architects to examine the situation with a critical eye and a fresh perspective. After identifying the needs of the various parties, they proposed a dynamic design solution that would convert the single-screen theater into two smaller, state-of-the-art theaters, while creating ground-level space for Walgreens. This approach uses the ground-floor retail as an engine to partially finance the upper-level theaters. In addition to the interior remodel and seismic upgrade to the space, MK Think also developed a beautiful design for the exterior that brought back to life much of the lost detail on the facade, restoring the building's historic grace and charm. Both sides embraced the plan, and in February of 2005, the S.F. Planning Commission unanimously approved it.

Now finally open, the Marina Theater's two auditoriums feature state-of-the-art sound and projection systems with roomy stadium seating: the 264-seat main auditorium also has room for a small stage for community events or live performances, while the



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