

BOZEMAN DAILY CHRONICLE

Sign of the times: Rialto restores Art Deco neon

By Gail Schontzler Chronicle Staff Writer 9 hrs ago



The Rialto sign looks over traffic on Main Street in Bozeman on Monday.

Freddy Monares/Chronicle

The Rialto Theater's retro neon sign flashed to life Saturday night, adding to the colorful lights and festive atmosphere of downtown Bozeman's Christmas Stroll.

"We tried to time it so when Santa went by, it turned on," said Brian Caldwell, architect with Thinktank Design Group. "It's great to bring a 1920s sign back to life."

Several people have told him how much they enjoy the multicolored sign, which replicates the theater's Art Deco original.

The new sign was built by Erik “Ole” Nelson of Media Station Design Works (not to be confused with Thinktank partner and architect Erik Nelson). Nelson researched how the original had looked and consulted with an installer who had worked on the old sign decades ago, Caldwell said.

The authentic sign is an indication that the Rialto’s multi-million-dollar renovation at 10 W. Main St. is close to being finished after nearly two years. Work will begin soon on erecting the rest of the Art Deco marquee, Caldwell said, and things should be finished by Dec. 20.

The revamped Rialto is set to open Jan. 16, with independent rock bands and other musical performers already signed up through April.

“We’re delighted,” Caldwell said. “We’re so excited to share the Rialto with Bozeman. It’s going to be a unique community asset.

“We’ve always felt Bozeman needs more opportunities for a live music venue, for arts and culture downtown. It’s part of our larger vision about adding to the cultural inventory of Bozeman.”

The ground floor “black box” will have a dance floor that can hold 400 and balcony seating. The second floor will feature a “burn box” food studio and a “light box” gallery beneath a large skylight.

The building, originally built in 1908, first served as a store and post office. In 1924 Alexander M. Russell, who’d worked as a draftsman under Bozeman architect Fred Willson and helped design the Emerson School and Ellen Theater, renovated the former post office into the Rialto Theater, as Rachel Phillips of the Gallatin History Museum wrote in a 2015 Bozeman Magazine article.

That was during the Roaring ‘20s, when silent films brought movie stars like Rudolph Valentino to America’s hinterlands. Lon Chaney Sr.’s “Hunchback of Notre Dame” showed at the Rialto, and it cost 35 cents to see a vaudeville matinee show there.

A 1937 black-and-white photo shows the Rialto’s façade with the same Art Deco vertical sign and marquee, listing a Gene Autry movie, “Boots and Saddles.” Caldwell said Willson worked on modifying the building in the 1930s.

Russell purchased the Ellen Theater across Main Street in the 1930s, and built the Joyce Theater on Main Street. In the post-war era, he opened the Star-Lite Drive-In on North Seventh Avenue.

A fire destroyed the Rialto's marquee and façade in 1967, according to Commons Wikimedia.

The television era put many movie theaters out of business, but the Rialto continued, offering many teenagers a first job and the chance to meet up at the Bungalow Drug soda fountain next door.

Starting in the 1980s, the Rialto served as home to the Bozeman Film Festival for 25 years, while owned by the Carmike Theaters chain. But the Rialto was not up to modern movie theater standards. In 2005, the Ellen and Rialto theaters were both sold. The Rialto closed, and then sat vacant for about eight years.

One investment group tried to raise money to renovate the theater and did reopen it in 2013 to show documentaries. But the investors ran into major legal troubles.

In 2015, the same investors who had success renovating the Lark Hotel purchased the Rialto.

Today, 94 years after the building first became the Rialto Theater, it is one of the oldest surviving and longest lasting theaters in Bozeman, Phillips pointed out.

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