

## Elderly are ushered into their apartments King Theatre units designed for seniors

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A new feature's playing in Lancaster called the "King Theatre Apartments" – and it might be headed for a long run.

The apartment complex at 419 E. King St. is designed for persons 62 or over who meet specific income guidelines. In the '50s, it was the site of the King Street Theatre, which closed in 1982.

Over the past months, the building has been renovated into apartments. However, the ambience and certain features of the original structure have been carefully preserved.

First and foremost is the marquee, an arresting neon rainbow aglow during evening hours.

In the lobby is the original terrazzo "Dutch" deco floor, an imposing old mirror with a decorated border and even a salvaged "exit" sign.

"We want to strike a balance between keeping the character of the theater and creating comfortable living quarters," says Larry Dinoff, architect of the project.

"Essentially, we built a building inside an already existing building," he explains. "It's an intriguing concept. People are able to move into a brand new building that automatically comes with 40 years of history."

The original theater opened in 1950 with a showing of "Ma and Pa Kettle Go To Town." It closed in 1982 after declining box office sales.

Thereafter, different uses were tried, including a church and seafood market. None thrived. In recent years, the building was boarded up.

Ultimately, the property was purchased by the Housing Development Corporation (HDC) and local developer W. Edwin Miller, who formed King Theater Associates. The theater and attached Victorian-era mansion, which served as the theater office, were purchased for \$210,000 from Mort Brodsky, one-time manager of the King Street Theatre.

The renovation project, which cost about \$2.1 million, began in October 1989, culminating with an official "grand opening" last month on Nov. 8.

Rents - which include heat, water, sewer, and trash removal - range from \$335 to \$399 per month in the 43 apartment units - six studios, 29 one-bedroom and eight two-bedroom apartments. Free parking is available to tenants in a lot adjacent to the building.

Twelve units are occupied, according to Judith Kline, HDC marketing director.

The apartments have been designed for the

comfort, safety, and aesthetic appeal of senior citizens. Units are carpeted and have central heat and air conditioning. "Nurse calls" (connected to a 24-hour answering service) are in bathrooms and bedrooms. And heat lamps were installed in the bathroom for elderly persons who chill easily.

Several units specifically accommodate persons confined to wheelchairs with lower light switches, higher electrical outlets, lever-action door hardware, glued down carpeting for easier wheelchair maneuvering, and height adjustable kitchen sinks.

"This could have had a very institutional feel," notes Dinoff. "That's why we chose materials so carefully. For instance, carpeted floors instead of tile."

Apartment lighting is artful, too - a soft, subtle combination of wall sconces and ceiling fixtures.

In the lobby are comfortable mauve and jade couches, and nearby, a kitchenette. Both provide a natural, relaxed backdrop for socializing. What used to be the candy booth has been converted to mailboxes.

And sentimental posters of movie icons like Errol Flynn, Jimmy Cagney, Joan Crawford, Marilyn Monroe, Ingrid Bergman, and Humphrey Bogart are strategically displayed.

"There's more to housing than just creating apartments," emphasizes Dinoff. "There also needs to be a community area where you can meet neighbors."

Local residents have eyed the renovations with interest.

"The apartments are very nice," says Barry Santiago, 25, of 44 E. King St. "I think they make the block look a whole lot better."

"I haven't seen the inside of the building yet, but I like what I see from the outside," says Cruz Padilla, of 430 E. King St.

"When I was a child, I used to spend Sunday afternoons at the King Street Theatre watching Disney movies," recalls Lancaster native Doreen Snyder, of 414 E. King St. "I think what they've done with the building is wonderful. Before the renovations, it was just a rat-infested place."

Don Hanna, manager of Bob's Food Rite at 451 E. King St., adds: "I think the building looks terrific. You always need a place for senior citizens. And the neon lights on the marquee make it look different - unique."

"We're still fighting the perception of this block, but I do think we're on the upswing," says Miss Kline.

Mort Brodsky, 72, of 1117 Wheatland Ave., had managed the theater from 1960 until its closing. He, too, has watched the renovations with interest.

"It's a solid old building and I think apartments are the

best possible use for it now," he says.

An admitted pragmatist, he adds, "I'm not a sentimental man. In its time, it was a good theater in a good neighborhood. But then it went downhill. Frankly, I was happy to get out of paying taxes and insurance on the building."

However, the most valuable assessment of the renovation project is offered by the current tenants.

"We feel blessed," says Florence Davidson, 66, who moved into a one-bedroom apartment in November with her husband Samuel. "This is just what we were looking for. We've been in other senior citizen apartments, but not this nice inside."

Mrs. Davidson, who had frequented the King Theatre as a child, was impressed by the renovations. She had first heard of the apartment openings through a newspaper ad.

"When I first saw the place, I stood there and looked at it in amazement," she says. "I thought about the man who sold 25 cent tickets and the popcorn and all the Saturdays I spent here watching Zorro, John Wayne, Roy Rogers, and Wild Bill Hickock."

Mr. Davidson, 71, also took in movies at the King Street Theatre. But now, he endorses the "peace and quiet" of his new surroundings.

The Davidsons had maintained a residence at 532 Howard Ave. for 19 years. But its upkeep became too grueling after Mr. Davidson suffered two heart attacks and Mrs. Davidson had her toes amputated.

For the couple, there is an added bonus to the apartment - its location, which is near the Baptist church they attend.

Earl and Mary Irvin, 79 and 78 respectively, are the Davidsons' next-door neighbors.

For 16 years they maintained a home at 127 E. Vine St., but as Mr. Irvin explains, "It got to be so too much responsibility with mowing grass and shoveling snow and so on. And there were too many stairs to climb."

Mrs. Irvin says she's delighted with their new home, although it's been challenging to consolidate a lifetime of memories into a two-bedroom apartment.

"I remember the movie theater here," she adds, with a twinkle in her eyes. "But, frankly, I liked dancing when I was younger. I'd rather live in a renovated dance hall."

For more information about the King Theatre Apartments call 291-1911, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., weekdays.

