

## King Apartments open to rave reviews Partnership led to second life for 'Dutch Deco' movie theater

By David Sturm  
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One year and \$2.1 million in the making, the curtain rose Thursday at the premiere of the glittering King Theater Apartments.

A cast of hundreds turned out at a wine-and-cheese reception to marvel at a spectacular "re-make" — the transformation of a down-at-the-heels movie palace and attached mansion into apartments for the elderly.

It was rave reviews all around. Lancaster can now boast one of the most imaginative adaptive re-use projects in its history.

How many apartment houses have an entrance under a neon-lit marquee and a lobby decorated with old movie posters? Even the ticket booth remains.

The stone and marble floor and decorative wall mirrors are still there. The inlaid hex signs on the floor combine with the Art Deco design flourishes to create a style that might be called "Dutch Deco."

Tenants have already moved into eight of the 43 apartments in the project and seven more units will be occupied within six weeks.

"Frankly, I didn't think it could be done," said a smiling Edmund Ruoff, president of the Housing Development Corp. and co-partner in the project, as he accepted congratulations from the throng.

Ruoff said it was a canny partnership that made it happen. When HDC teamed its financial savvy with the architectural vision of W. Edwin Miller, president of Progressive Investments, Inc. and co-partner in the project, things fell into place.

The outcome not only adds to the city's affordable housing stock, but also serves as a strong residential anchor to the 400 block of East King Street.

The King Theater opened in 1950 with a showing of "Ma and Pa Kettle Go to Town" and closed in 1982 after a declining box office, with a showing of "Robin Hood" and "Silent Rage."

Different uses have been tried out at the King in the past eight years, including a church and a seafood market. But none lasted and a proposal to turn it into a teen dance hall never got off the ground.

In recent years it has simply stood vacant, a boarded-up relic of the post-war boom.

It was Progressive Investment's Miller who began shopping around his vision of a "building inside a building," a reuse that would preserve the entrance and lobby as is, but build two levels of apartments inside the massive auditorium.

Miller ended up at the HDC offices in the old Eastern Market, a block west of the theater, looking to take on the non-profit developers as a consultant. Instead, it resulted in a partnership.

HDC arranged financing through Fulton Bank, which is also the equity owner of the project. Additional financing was lined up with the city and the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency.

The project also qualified for tax credits. This meant that the conversion could be completed and rents discounted \$100 below market rate.

"The tax credits were the fundamental driving force in the project," said Ruoff.

The theater and attached Victorian-era mansion, which served as the theater office, were purchased from Morton Brodsky for \$210,000 in October 1989 and the renovations began.

In August, HDC, which is managing the project, began taking applications for the apartments. The complex has six studio apartments renting for \$335, 29 one-bedroom units renting for \$355, and eight two-bedroom units for \$399. Rent includes heat, hot water, sewer and trash removal, but not electricity.

All tenants must be age 62 or older and meet income requirements, which typically means a \$17,000 annual income limit for a couple.

"I'm surprised how we are attracting people from outside the city," said Judy Kline,



Intelligencer Journal photo by Suzette Wenger  
Stars at the grand opening of the King Theater Apartments are, from left, co-partner W. Edwin Miller; Melissa Geier, an HDC employee standing in for Scarlett O'Hara; Karen A. Miller, state secretary of community affairs; and co-partner Edmund Ruoff.

HDC marketing director. Tenants hail from Neffsville, Leola, New Holland, and the state of Colorado, she said.

One tenant couple from West Vine Street, she added, were regular movie-goers at the King Theater in its heyday.

Ruoff said credit for the preservation and re-use of the marquee and lobby should go to the care taken by the general contractor, David G. Heisey, Inc. of Elizabethtown, and the imagination of the project architect, Lawrence Dinoff Associates of Strasburg.