

## **A trendy block takes shape**

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BRIDGEPORT — The Bijou Theater ballroom is no longer a welcoming place for the swoops, twirls and dips of formal dancing, but its new occupants consider it a perfect place to design buildings.

"It's all about the pickup conversations," not the planned meetings said Paul Antinozzi — whose father, Daniel, started architectural firm Antinozzi Associates 51 years ago — when discussing good design practices.

To that end, the firm's \$700,000 investment in the conversion of the two-story, 11,700-square-foot space on the theater's second and third floors included few walls taller than 42 inches. What was once the dance floor houses open workspace delineated by waist-high walls, over which designers and other employees can talk, instead of the barriers of cubicle walls. Even the few offices at the front of the building, overlooking Fairfield Avenue, will have glass walls facing into the space; a conference room at the back of the room will also have an interior glass wall.

The firm's 30 employees have moved from the Stratford office, but some construction work is still going on.

The question, Antinozzi said Tuesday, was whether to go for a "funky industrial" look, renovating the 99-year-old ballroom, which hadn't been occupied since 1950, into a completely white space. Instead they compromised, using warm colors Antinozzi said creates a friendly work environment and round rather than square forms to turn the exposed ductwork into a design feature. They kept most of the original wood floors in the main office area and three grand chandeliers with amber hanging lights, which descend from the exposed steel trusses of the 36-foot ceiling.

The third-floor balcony once offered stadium-style seating, ascending from a mid-thigh-high, cast-iron balustrade to the wall. The balcony is

suspended by rods attached to beams in the ceiling and its base, said George Perham, an Antinozzi principal and vice president.

Antinozzi Associates, which had funding help from a city block grant loan, brought that floor up about 2 feet to a uniform height, and added a waist-high metal rail with thin wires that doesn't block the view from either above or below. They colored the balustrade — now another design feature — amber, to match the chandelier lights.

According to Perham, the air conditioning system adds a bit of white noise and the volume of the space helps keep the noise level down overall. They've even built a "white room," so when the company's interior designers need to pick a color they're not influenced by undertones in paint or carpet.

This type of detail is a product of the nearly four years the move has been in the works.

Developer Philip Kuchma, whose Kuchma Corp. owns the site, called Antinozzi about taking the space when he first began the Bijou Theater project. Plans call for a movie theater and in June Kuchma received planning and zoning approval for a \$25 million, five-story residential and retail building for the corner of Fairfield Avenue and Lafayette Circle. This building — designed by Antinozzi Associates — will be next to the theater building's second restaurant, Two Boots Roadhouse, which Kuchma expects to open before August.

Antinozzi and Perham, whose firm has done a lot of work in Bridgeport, were already considering moving here. They looked at the old Boy's Club and CitiTrust buildings, Perham said, but "None of them were quite as artistic as this one."

"We're a little bit of pioneers," Antinozzi said. "That's what architecture's supposed to be."

"Bridgeport needs to show people that there are prominent companies and prominent organizations that want to be here," Kuchma said. "We have to push away that whole notion that Bridgeport attracts second best."

Antinozzi Associates aren't alone in the Bijou Theater building.

Caf Roma has been up and running since December 2005 and, even

though business slowed a bit during all the recent construction, "It was for a good cause," co-owner Massimo Tabacco said. Business, which includes new customers from Antinozzi Associates, is already improving, he added.

Tabacco said he and partner Pino Pace are also starting to see foot traffic along Fairfield Avenue, and customers are coming in at night just for dinner.

"We have faith in Phil [Kuchma]. We think he's really the force that's dragging [this along]," Tabacco said. Kuchma is waiting on one last lease signature before declaring the Bijou Theater project full. That lease is with a New York-based filmmaker, but Kuchma said last week he couldn't offer any more details until the deal is done.

This filmmaker is in addition to Larry Locke Productions, whose principal is filming a documentary about Bridgeport Mayor John M. Fabrizi; CardinalPointe Film Funding, another New York company that is opening a Bridgeport office; BAW, which stands for Bob Abbate Marketing; Two Boots Roadhouse; and online marketing company Big Ideas Productions LLC.

"We're trying to create a little bit of a film center here," said Kuchma, who added he deliberately went after other tenants with a creative bent.

"People who by being in a space help to bring a space to life."

"We're just in the process of moving right now," Big Ideas founder Vincent Descoust said Friday. The 10-year-old company originated in the Bridgeport Innovation Center, but Descoust, who has three employees, said, "I needed to move in order to grow the company."

He's leased about 700 square feet on the fourth floor, at the back of the Bijou Theater, which meets his requirements for something "less conventional," that is still a good place to bring clients.

"There's a great potential in downtown Bridgeport," Descoust said, comparing it to the renaissance of South Norwalk.

Tabacco, too, sees comparisons to "SoNo," at least where it was 10 years ago. "It's not just a project anymore. It's starting to be reality."

Kuchma isn't the only person to see potential in this block of Fairfield Avenue.

For seven years, Joseph Sangut's JS General Contracting LLC has worked on the four buildings Lafayette Square Associates owns in that area — 300, 350 and 360 Fairfield Ave. (including the parking garage) and 1 Lafayette Circle.

Now, Sangut hopes to open Lafayette Coffee Caf & Gallery in the ground floor of the parking garage across from the theater in five to six weeks.

"Tenants love him. People love him," his drive and desire for perfection, said Christopher Werba, property manager of the four buildings, when asked why the owners encouraged Sangut to open a coffee shop.

The original idea goes back about seven years, to when Joseph's Steakhouse came into a spot on Fairfield Avenue that had included a deli. Werba said the owners of Lafayette Square Associates — Sheldon Goldstein and Edward Silverman — thought the parking garage and existing buildings would create enough business to make a coffee shop with a deli a success.

As for the new development at the Bijou Theater, Werba said, "That's just the cream" on top.

Sangut, who admits to tearing down the walls in the nearly 3,000-square-foot space three times before finding a configuration he likes, plans to sell coffee, high-end pastries, hot and cold sandwiches and beer and wine. In addition to a salad bar, he's building a private room just for meetings and he'll be able to roll out the windows looking out onto Fairfield Avenue, to create an open dining space.

Sangut said he hasn't yet decided on the interior decor, but isn't worried about locking in a palette.

"Whatever it takes — paint it once, twice or five times."