

April 17, 2021

Honorable Mayor Sayoc, Council Members and Town Management
Town of Los Gatos
110 East Main Street
Los Gatos, CA 95030

Re: Proposed Gift of Los Gatos Theater

Dear Mayor, Council Members and Town Team Members,

My name is Jim Goetz and I am writing this letter on behalf of my family. We have enjoyed the Monte Sereno/Los Gatos area for most of our lives, where we have been active members of the community. We raised and educated all three of our daughters in Los Gatos public schools; they thrived in the wonderful, small-town experience.

We took on restoration of the theater nearly ten years ago. We purchased the building from the Cormack family estate. Mrs. Cormack acted as a fantastic steward for several decades, and as a result, the theater remained standing as an important piece of our town's history. When the theater came on the market, we learned of other bidders' unfortunate plans to close the theater and attempt to convert the facility into a nightclub or office and retail space. We quickly organized a small group interested in preserving the theater, "Three Sisters Cinema," and decided to purchase the theater ourselves to ensure that it remains a historical, community-focused anchor of our town.

The Los Gatos Theater has been a fixture in our town since 1915, the dawn of the age of motion picture exhibition. A century later, small-town historical theaters all over the country have been transformed into community treasures that do much more for families than show Hollywood blockbusters: The Stanford in Palo Alto, and the Cameo in St. Helena, are wonderful local examples. We hope to emulate these examples.

As the Goetz clan moves forward, we hope to give the theater building back to the community as a gift. The Town of Los Gatos is the natural home for this historic building. We hope to start discussion to turn the Los Gatos Theater and its operating entities, including the existing retail tenants, over to the town as a 501 (c) (3) gift with no expectations of payment — we simply hope to secure a commitment from the town to act as "Steward" to ensure the theater's longevity.

This represents an opportunity to provide special screenings of Hollywood premiers, develop a family film series, cater to the needs of local teens, serve as a refuge for the three local elementary schools with ambitions for live theater — and, of course, to host the judges of the Holiday Children's Parade in balcony seating.

We believe that the transition of theater stewardship from the Goetz family to the town will be welcomed with enthusiasm by the community. We hope that this letter begins a dialogue with your colleagues regarding that possibility. To provide additional background on the theater and what it means to our community members, we have ghostwritten an article where you can write the headline and close based on the decisions that lie ahead.

We want this historic theater to remain a treasure that the Town of Los Gatos, our neighbors and our family can be proud of. By reclaiming our links to the town's past, we can rekindle a sense of place and begin a new chapter in Los Gatos history amid this time of broader national transformation.

We look forward to your feedback and to continuing this dialogue. Please feel free to contact us at 408-888-7892 or jim.goetz@gmail.com if we can be of further assistance.

Respectfully submitted,

JJG

Jim Goetz
(On behalf of Alicia, Melanie, Samantha and Ashley Goetz)

SAMPLE HED: Small-Town Theater Reinvents Itself in Moments of Historic Change

The “GATOS” knife glowed against the night sky, jutting up and casting light across quiet streets as people sheltered in place during March 2020.

Three months later, protesters marched downtown toward the Los Gatos Theatre marquee, chanting that Black Lives Matter, as they gathered to mourn the death of George Floyd.

Now, in spring 2021, masked parents and neighbors stroll by the grand white facade as North Santa Cruz Avenue grows lively again, offering glimmers of hope that the world will reopen soon. Throughout a year of tumult and change, the Los Gatos Theatre has remained an anchor for the community.



A small town's historical touchstone

Los Gatos Theatre has been a town fixture since 1915, during the birth of the motion picture age. The building was introduced to the community as Strand Theater, featuring a single screen and embodying an architectural elegance — in keeping with the times — that suggested a trip to the theater should be a distinctive, premium experience.

The theater has experienced more than a few transformations since its inception. After a fire demolished the building in 1929, it was redesigned with an Art Deco aesthetic. Christened “The Premier,” this remodeling brought about a marquee, murals and an organ to accompany silent films.

It later became known as the Los Gatos Theater — referred to as “The Gatos” by some — in the 1940s. Two decades later, multi-screen movie theaters were sprouting across the U.S. as cinema grew in popularity. But just as the Los Gato Theater was a magnet for young families, it also appeared to be an unfortunate magnet for natural disasters: another fire struck the building in the 1970s before the famous 1989 earthquake compromised it again.

Despite it all, the structure embodied a sense of resilience. “It kept getting reinvented, in some way or another,” says Alicia Goetz, the theater’s current owner.

Prior to the earthquake, then-owner Carmel Cormack had converted the theater into a double-screen facility (her devotion was such that she even lived directly above it). As one of the South Bay’s few remaining owners of an independent movie house, Cormack was committed to her theater’s longevity and proposed converting it into a 3-story building and restaurant during the post-earthquake reconstruction process.

However, the town declined to move forward. Camera Cinemas, a San Jose-based independent movie chain, began managing theater operations in 1993. The theater took on yet another new name, the Los Gatos Cinema, to reflect the management shift. Cormack remained the owner until her death in 2011, preserving the theater as a vital core of the town ecosystem.

When the roughly 10,000 square foot building hit the market following Cormack’s death, it captured the attention of local entrepreneurs. Some dreamed of converting the facility into a nightclub while others envisioned its value as a retail store or restaurant, given the building’s central downtown location on North Santa Cruz Avenue.

The Goetz family purchased the building in 2011 as a philanthropic project, citing the impact of the Los Gatos Theatre on their daughters’ childhood experiences and desire to save the quintessential hub. Alicia Goetz has been the owner of the space, which now includes two screens and retail stores, since 2011.

‘The theater is ground zero of Los Gatos’

A key priority of the Goetz family was to reinvigorate the building, which had fallen into disrepair. Alicia hired Florian Barth, a local real estate professional and builder, to lead the restoration from 2012 to 2014.

Barth’s imperative was clear: maintain the building’s original look and its independent, family-focused feel. That included the original theater’s Art Deco design — and the cornerstone blade that has always distinguished it — featured in photographs, local advertisements and historic documents of Los Gatos throughout the 20th century.

“The building itself, and the knife itself, has become an icon for the town,” says Jim Goetz, nodding to the Colony Hotel in Miami as inspiration for the facade.

Barth teamed up with architect Gary Kohlsaat to spearhead the redesign. “Growing up and working in the area, I know what the theater meant to the community — not only for movies, but also as a gathering place,” says Kohlsaat, who recalls childhood memories of seeing Rocky Horror Show at the theater. “There was a lot of pressure from the get-go to make sure that we got this right,” he says.



Kohlsaas, Barth and their team analyzed the theater’s structural integrity while steeping themselves in the historical details that had set it apart. The doors reopened in 2014.

This modern revival enabled the theater to resume its cultural perch at the epicenter of the community. Locals used the space for events like fashion shows, high school award ceremonies and birthday parties. The balcony over the entrance still promises “the best seat in town for the annual children’s parade,” says Kohlaas.

“It is fair to say that the theater is ground zero of Los Gatos,” says Barth, calling it the town’s “center of gravity.”

Beyond its physical presence, the theater has been a launchpad for social dialogue. It hosted fundraisers focused on broader issues affecting the community, screening documentaries like “Audrie & Daisy” — which followed a sexual assault against a Saratoga teenager — in 2016. Proceeds went to a local nonprofit organization. The theater also showed films like “Under Our Skin,” which explored the hidden epidemic of Lyme Disease, for an event spearheaded by a Los Gatos family that struggled with chronic illness.

On the micro level, the theater cemented itself as the birthplace of more than a few Los Gatos romances. Several students asked classmates to prom on the marquee, which was even the site of one

(successful) marriage proposal in 2014, according to Alicia. “A whole lot of first dates happened there,” says Jim.

Meanwhile, it was an engine for the local economy. Young families frequented nearby restaurants after a movie, while students strolled downtown for matinees and ice cream. Alicia focused on hiring high school students — specifically, first-time employees — almost exclusively. Seventeen of the theater’s 20 employees at a given time typically were students, she says.



Part-time theater manager Alex Koss says he had the pleasure of watching friendships bloom between staff as they learned ins and outs of the business. Koss, a lifelong film lover who began working at the Los Gatos Theater in 2017, appreciates that he’ll forever be the “first boss” for many of his reports. He took his duty seriously, teaching employees the basics of customer service and money management while they navigated the challenges of adolescence.

“It’s hard to get that first job... [and] find someone who’s willing to take a chance on you without any prior experience,” says Alicia. As freshmen entered Los Gatos High School and seniors graduated, preparing for college or other next steps, the faces of theater staff were constantly changing.

This shifting composition presented a snapshot of the evolution of the theater itself. “It embraces a different generation each time,” says Alicia.

Resilience through crisis

The theater’s doors have stayed closed since businesses shuttered when the pandemic hit in March 2020. Koss remains employed, and looks forward to the day when familiar faces will pop inside to say hello and chatter fills the halls once again.

His anticipation is shared by many: “At various restaurants... I was sitting next to an older couple who said, ‘Oh, I can't wait until the theater opens back up,’” says Barth.

The economic downturn caused by the pandemic has collided with an industry already in peril. The market for streaming services grew by 37% in 2020, as platforms like Hulu, Disney+ and Netflix have battled for viewers in an increasingly competitive arena. Covid stands to accelerate the well-documented struggles of corporations like AMC Entertainment, the world’s largest multiplex chain, while another [beloved chain](#) of theaters in Los Angeles recently announced its impending closure to the dismay of city cinephiles.

“With the pandemic closing theaters, it’s tough not to see the writing on the wall for these businesses,” says Kohlsaar. “I truly think the theater is one of the centerpieces of the downtown and everything possible should be done to preserve this use.”

At the same time, Americans are peering around the corner to a summer renaissance of social connection after more than a year of grueling isolation. While quarantined at home, many turned to stories onscreen for escapism and comfort. To Los Gatos residents, the town theater represents a tangible manifestation both of a pastime they miss and a neighborly camaraderie they long to reinvigorate.

“It is so nice to have pillars and buildings standing there, reminding us why we need to continue on,” says Barth. “Reminding us what we had in the past, and showing us what we look forward to when this is all behind us.”

Renewed cultural optimism, coupled with the “last man standing” odds of this small-town theater places it in a unique position to re-emerge as a venue for community events, suggests Jim. In doing so, the theater can continue to preserve “some of the joys of yesteryear in a modern Silicon Valley town,” he says.

Meanwhile, theater devotees say it’s only fitting that the historic building — which had survived a litany of disasters before this unprecedented year ushered in crises of different kinds — will continue to reinvent itself.

“The world is an ever-evolving environment. Evolution takes place; we can’t stop and have grandfather's blocks in every one of our houses because that was once the story,” says Barth. “But there are certain things which shape our surroundings, whether it is a tall monument or a very old oak tree.”

Old buildings like the Los Gatos Theatre hold rich histories; they reflect the ethos, pulse and purpose of a place that can be absorbed by generations that follow. “If we don't cherish them... we will never get there, and our siblings will never see where we came from and how we lived,” Barth says.

As the building's utility and legacy evolve, Alicia, for one, hopes it will remain woven into the fabric of Los Gatos life — capturing nostalgia for its past along with optimism for the future. In a changing modern world, this small-town venue offers “something to rely on.”

“It's the perfect time, because of how isolated we've all been with the pandemic ... to embrace a new beginning for the theater” and allow the space to reintroduce itself to the community, she says.

If history repeats itself, Los Gatos families will be waiting with open arms.
