COMMENTARY

The new 4th Avenue — preserving history with new investment

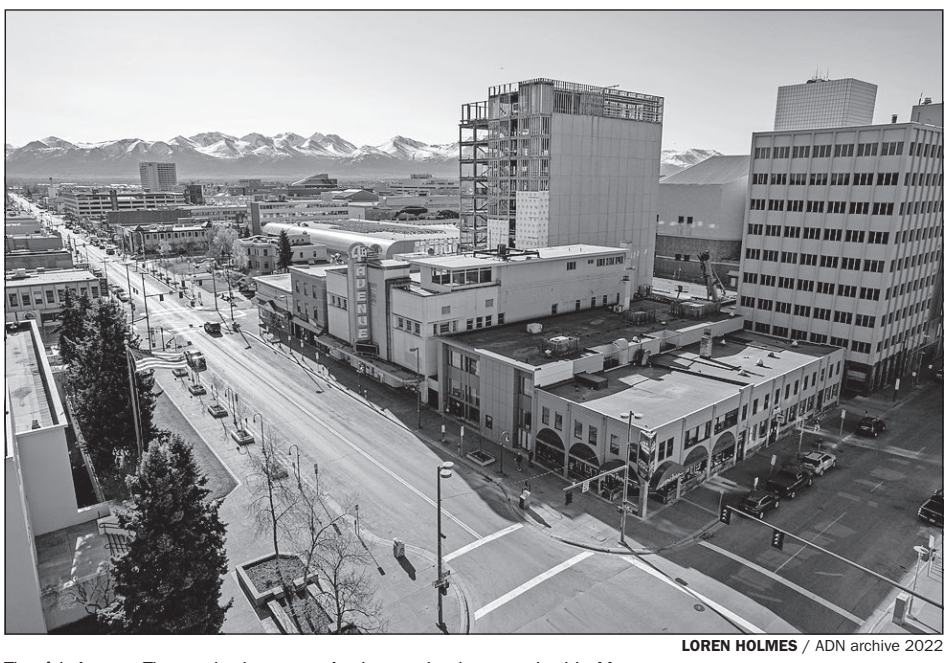
Derrick and Terence Chang

The 4th Avenue Theater was acquired by Peach Investments at the 2009 foreclosure sale. Peach has invested heavily to maintain and repair the aging structure while looking for viable renewal options. Such efforts included water intrusion repairs, mechanical upgrades and a new roof membrane to decelerate the deterioration, whilst keeping all utilities and services active on a non-occupiable building.

The structure had 40 years of deferred maintenance and the problems have been compounding rapidly. Building officials and certified inspectors found serious, unsurmountable code compliance issues that are considered potentially dangerous in the event of a cataclysmic event. Specific violations were accessibility, egress, fire and life safety, heating/HVAC/electrical/plumbing systems, and structural/seismic concerns as well. Environmental contractors were hired to mitigate various levels of hazardous material such as asbestos, mastics and lead. Even all the way back in 1989, the municipality declared the theater building a dangerous building. Subsequently, a detailed Condition Inspection Report published Nov. 14, 2006, documented all the faulty elements of the property, and the initial cost estimates to restore the building were too expensive for any interested parties to bear.

Another serious problem was found recently when city planners of the 4th Avenue Signals and Lighting Upgrade project discovered that the 4th Avenue Theater building's facade elements encroach the sidewalk right-of-way, and the basement encroaches further beyond the property line underground by an approximately 15 feet into Fourth Avenue.

The municipality does not hold any agreement for right-of-way encroachment with property owners, and it would require backfilling the void where the existing basement is. Without the basement, the structure will not seismically support the building façade.



LOREN HOLMES / ADN archive 2022

The 4th Avenue Theater in downtown Anchorage is photographed in May.

Over the years, Peach explored numerous "adapt-and-reuse" methods by converting the existing building into a new use, but none were economically feasible as a stand-alone project — even a potential partnership with a global eatery operator who is known for repurposing "older" buildings. Shortly after retaining ownership of the property and as part of its initial due diligence of the acquired "historic" property, Peach engaged and worked with an esteemed historic preservation consultant (with presences throughout the U.S.) to examine the building, its historic significance and integrity while exploring redevelopment opportunities based on examples around the country. They also explored how to best capture and preserve key historic building aspects such as the art deco inspired look and feel we associate with 4th Avenue itself and the former theater.

As was stated in the report, "the total demolition of the 4th Avenue Theater building would be a loss. But the economics have worked against this theater since the 1960s. Its reality has been the same for 40 years as the building suffered under the ever-growing weight of deferred maintenance. Its future has always been about having a viable revenue stream. In this sense, the decision on its future was decided a long time ago." In the end, a viable reuse strategy was not found and demolition was recommended.

Peach recognizes the affinity by some for the 4th Avenue Theater building. It also knows the history of repeated false starts and failed enterprises in keeping this building alive. It also acknowledges that a 1,000-seat single-plex movie theater or performance venue in downtown Anchorage is not a viable option, as proven back in 1989.

We recognize the best path forward would be to integrate as much of the historically significant features of the existing building as possible into a new development project. This strategy would generate financing and revenues and allow the retention of the most character-defining features.

There have been a variety of historic preservation projects across the country that have successfully accomplished this at varying degrees defined by the specific circumstances of the site.

In order to prioritize the preservation work necessary to document, protect and remove art, fixtures and other special features of the building, we utilized the expertise of the National Park Service, Heritage Documentation Programs (HDP), for advice on best practices for documentation with the goal of including the building in the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS).

The Historic American Building Survey is the nation's first federal preservation program, begun in 1933 to document America's architectural heritage. It is a permanent record, kept by the Department of Interior, consisting of photographs, detailed architectural drawings and written historical reports. To date, most of this information has been collected. A high-definition laser scan of the theater building, both exterior and interior, has been completed as well as photo documentation using current federal historic preservation standards for long term visual storage that includes using large-format black and white film.

When completed, this information will be part of a national database maintained at the Library of Congress, where records on more than 40,000 historic sites are maintained in are available to the public copyright free in both hard copy and via the Library's website.

Peach remains committed to a vigorous effort to salvage and preserve portions of the distinctive interior features in the lobby, mezzanine and murals. In addition, a project to remove, conserve and crate the interior artwork has been completed. Namely, the two large Alaska history murals flanking the stage, the curved Denali relief in the lobby, and the wildlife panels by the staircase, were handled in such a way they may be restored and reinstalled in a later development. Custom crates were designed and built for each unique piece of art and have been fully documented and stored off site at a secured location. The removal and restoration were performed by a local professional artist and team.

Other than the murals, other salvageable interior aspects of the theater have been removed from the premises, categorized and stored so they may be worked into the future design where possible.

Items include but not limited are: the stars and light fixtures/chandeliers hung in theater ceiling, wood doors and hardware, "4th Avenue" interior sign, aisle signs, sections of stairs and banister, etc. Removal and reuse of additional, more complicated items from the built interior will happen under the direction of the company certified to handle hazardous material in case further remediation is necessary.

The building we drive past now is not the building many remember from the past, nor the authentic representation of the original version. It has not been inhabited for almost 20 years. In order to bring life back to the "theater" building, it is necessary to reimagine it being part of a larger development: the type of new development that will honor and celebrate the rich history and diverse architecture of Anchorage downtown's unique contexts while breathing new life and creating a safer and vibrant district where investment is long overdue.

Starting this week, a certified contractor will be onsite at Block 41 to conduct and carry out required environmental remediation and demolition activities. This will include assessment and removal of the "4th Avenue" characters on the marquee sign (both sides) as well as other facade aspects. While the condition and removal challenges of the current sign are not yet fully understood, development plans include recreating a marquee sign with modern materials using the current sign measurements, design and color palate as guidance. Future display or use of the marquee sign will be determined after its condition is assessed and future sign designs are finalized. The plan is to maintain the street-level definition of 4th Avenue and allow the reconstruction of the distinctive Art Deco façade.

Over the next few weeks, the community can expect to see safety fencing installed and crews hard at work on the next stages of hazardous material mitigation and salvage of any remaining items. These steps will make way for making way for the redevelopment of an area downtown Anchorage that will serve as a catalyst to creating a better, safer place for our families and visitors. We are excited to be part of a new downtown.

Derrick and Terence Chang are co-owners of Peach Holdings, the LLC that owns the 4th Avenue Theater. Peach Holdings, LLC, is a private, family-owned company located in Anchorage, currently leading a $41 million-plus renovation of the former Key Bank Plaza at 601 Fifth Ave. in downtown Anchorage.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NO HOMELESS CRISIS

The Anchorage Daily News and liberal Assembly members are creating a false crisis in Anchorage. They are yelling fire where there is none. The current street homeless problem isn't some new problem; it's been going on for decades for two reasons — Bean's Cafe, Brother Francis Shelter and Catholic Social Services have enabled the problem, and you can't help people who refuse to want to help themselves.

It's insane to suggest we build homeless shelters all over Anchorage. Who in their right mind would even suggest building one out of the Golden Lion right next to one of the busiest intersections in Anchorage? The last thing Anchorage needs is homeless shelters as gathering points all over our city. Mayor Dave Bronson was right to want to put them in one location so they can be kept under control and emergency services won't have to scramble all over Anchorage. Shame on the Assembly for keeping Sullivan Arena open for homeless for so long during the COVID-19 pandemic. It should have been shut down more than a year ago. Bronson's idea was brilliant, to put them all in one campground. By doing that, our other parks and greenbelts will become safer for residents.

Building nice locations for homeless all over Anchorage will encourage more homelessness. Who really thinks if we blow $20 million on the homeless, they will stop drinking and panhandling on every street corner? Stop illegally camping everywhere? What about the never-ending costs of maintaining these facilities? Some ask what about this winter? That's the responsibility of the homeless, not taxpayers.

No matter what Bronson does on any issue, he's attacked by the left. They still refuse to accept he's our elected mayor. They hate him more than Donald Trump. Until we stop enabling the street homeless, nothing will improve. The liberal Assembly just wants to enable on a larger scale. Shame on them for that and constantly working to keep our city divided.

— Richard Rhyner
Anchorage

LET'S HEAR THE PLAN

Another ad for Nick Begich arrived in the mail yesterday, with the statement that "Nick will take action to bring inflation under control." Immediately, the question came to mind, "Hmm, exactly what action does he propose to take to control this worldwide phenomenon driven by the economic forces of supply and demand? This is a phenomenon that governments across the globe, both conservative and liberal, have been unable thus far to control."

If Begich really has a plan of action to control inflation, one he really thinks will work, let's hear it. I'm sure leaders across the world and across the political spectrum would love to hear it. And he would easily win the election, being the only person in the world who had the idea that controlled inflation.

— Steve McKeever
Anchorage

COMMENTARY

The cautious calculation behind whether Fox will dump Trump

Margaret Sullivan

The symbiotic, mutually advantageous bond between Rupert Murdoch's media empire and Donald Trump has often been described as a romance or a love fest.

Now that the relationship looks as if it may be headed to divorce court, let's remember what really matters in any decision to split up: money and power.

And let's remember what doesn't matter one whit: loyalty.

There's no such thing on either side of this equation. In fact, I'd argue that neither side is capable of it.

Trump, after all, is the president who seemed to think the vicious calls of the mob on Jan. 6, 2021, to hang his ever-faithful Vice President Mike Pence were a pretty reasonable idea.

And he's the same guy who mysteriously seems to forget close associates as soon as they cause him any trouble. After White House aide Cassidy Hutchinson — a frequent presence in his meetings whose workstation was mere steps away from the Oval Office — offered devastating testimony to the Jan. 6 select committee in June, Trump suffered the usual amnesia: "I hardly know who this person, Cassidy Hutchinson, is, other than I heard very negative things about her (a total phony and 'leaker') …"

Semper fidelis, in other words, isn't really Trump's strong suit. More appropriate is what legendary Chicago columnist Mike Royko suggested as a motto for his city where public officials often had their hands in the till: Ubi est mea? ("Where's mine?)

As for the Murdochs, cold hard pragmatism will rule the day. If Trump continues to serve the media empire's purposes as he has been doing so effectively for the past six years — bringing money in the form of ratings and viewership and benefiting Murdoch's chosen political party — he'll remain in favor.

If not, then he'll be tossed overboard without an iota of regret, at least not by the top leadership: Rupert Murdoch and his increasingly important son, Lachlan.

Whether that will actually happen is not entirely clear. The signs are still a little murky and certainly open to interpretation.

On the one hand, the opinion pages of two Murdoch newspapers — the Wall Street Journal and the New York Post — have turned on Trump recently, both offering scathing editorials that blasted him for his role on Jan. 6, 2021, particularly his utter lack of leadership in calling off the dangerous mob. And, far more important than any newspaper editorial, his most valuable media ally, Fox News, has skipped much of the live coverage of the former president's speeches and rallies while not interviewing him live for months.

Worse, the person emerging as his chief rival for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, Florida's Gov. Ron DeSantis, has clearly caught the cable network's eye.

But there's still plenty of sycophancy on display. Just days ago, the talking heads of "Fox & Friends" — perhaps chastened by Trump's raging that they had gone to the "dark side" after they reported some unfavorable poll numbers — once again stroked his fragile but oversize ego. Brian Kilmeade called him the "greatest golfing president ever," and Ainsley Earhardt backed that up with one admiring exclamation: "Athletic!"

Meanwhile, Tucker Carlson showed up at Trump's Saudi-funded golf tournament over the weekend in Bedminster, N.J., and yukked it up with the former president over an anti-Biden chant from the crowd.

The Murdochs, it seems clear, are waiting to see which way the wind blows.

Yes, they are having their doubts about Trump as the right horse to back, but most of all, they desperately want to hang onto the vast base of MAGA voters (and viewers) who haven't quite made their minds up about moving on.

"Appearing loyal to Trump made them money, and the minute it stops making them money, they will stop doing it," a former Fox News commentator was quoted in a weekend story from my colleagues Sarah Ellison and Jeremy Barr. The elder Murdoch may be personally disgusted, or at least put off, by Trump's malfeasance as it has been revealed in the House hearings; that distaste is probably what's being reflected in the Post and Journal editorials.

But we're not there yet. And lofty ideals will have nothing to do with what ultimately happens. Pure pragmatism will rule the day.

Despite his occasional fits of pique, Trump will never really turn on Fox. After all, his social media platform, Truth Social, is no substitute for the constant blast of support that he can get from the most popular cable network in the land and from its prime-time stars. And the television alternatives he once touted, such as One America and Newsmax, have not gotten the job done.

But the soulless expediency runs in both directions. If Trump manages to snag the Republican nomination in 2024 — very far from impossible despite his falling star — Fox will be right there by his side with pompoms and megaphone at the ready.

Not because of personal affection. Not because of stalwart loyalty. But because that will be the best bet for maintaining what really matters.

Margaret Sullivan is The Washington Post's media columnist. Previously, she was the New York Times's public editor and the chief editor of the Buffalo News, her hometown paper.

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