

Rialto Theatre – 119-127 Mathewson Street

Originally, the property was the monumental Greek Revival Westminster Congregational Church designed by James Bucklin and/or Russell Warren in 1829. In 1906, it was rechristened as the Scenic Temple Theater, home to Vaudeville and motion pictures.

Much of the second-story brick façade visible from Mathewson Street today dates from 1919 when the portico, or colonnaded porch of the church, was removed and the building remodeled by William R. Walker & Son as the Rialto Theatre.

In the mid-20th century, the back of the theater was removed for a parking lot and the ground-level portion of the front façade given a new treatment for shops with offices above. The lobby and facade remain as does the balcony with a capacity of around 200+. It is one of the four remaining original vaudeville theaters left in Providence. Others include (The Strand/Paramount, Trinity/Majestic, and the Providence Performing Arts Center). All are situated within a 4 block radius.

Over the most recent years, the first floor has been an office, bar, restaurant, and retail, and until now the ability to convert the building back into a theatre was not possible. Now under new ownership, the tenants on the first floor have all been relocated and this historic site can once again be brought to life. The lobby entrance and the 2nd-floor stadium seating have survived all the renovations over the last 80 years, and remained hidden until recently uncovered by the new developer.

The existing layout of the 1st floor is separated into three units, however, they are able to be re-configured into two larger units or one main space

which could provide an amazing opportunity for restaurant or foyer for the theatre. The left end unit is 70% complete built out for a bar-restaurant with all new plumbing, HVAC, and a bar area roughed in. The middle space was being used as a high-end boutique pop up sneaker store selling \$400-\$10,000 sneakers. The right unit is raw and would be the main entrance using the original staircase leading to the theater on the 2nd floor.

The second floor is wide open with a balcony and some non-loadbearing walls. If removed, this would allow for a larger layout and increased capacity potentially in the 300-500 person range. Potential to increase the balcony seating along the sidewalls of the theatre could provide “box seating.”

The space would then be conducive for a number of things: shows/plays, performance space, live music, comedy, spoken word, pop-up events, presentations, movie-house, special events and more. Think of a mini “House of Blues” with a 1st-floor bar/eatery/brewery. And in addition to the parking lot directly behind the building, there are over 300 surface parking spaces within 2 blocks around the site.

Currently, there is no other venue of this size in the Providence area that has a balcony, and a wide stage setup. The remaining layers and open lot in the rear provide a fascinating opportunity for adaptive reuse where 21st century intervention at the back of the building can complete the sandwich. Surely a new use can be found for this valuable and vulnerable downtown infill opportunity. Otherwise, if demolished, Providence would lose a slice of its ecclesiastical and theatrical history.