

Historic Miami Beach theater could get a second act - location 550 Washington Avenue, Miami Beach kMIAMI BEACH

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The business of photography and filmmaking in South Florida is a fraction of what it used to be. So what is a South Beach studio owner to do?

That's the question that has hung over Eugene Rodriguez for years, only now he may have an answer: Keep the studio, but add an entertainment venue.

Losing money on the historic Paris Theater, Rodriguez is about to set off on a scouting and recruiting mission in Europe, looking for talent to come to Miami Beach and turn the film and photography studio into a one-of-a-kind, weekend nights hot spot.

"The idea is to create a really great destination for people who want to be entertained not only by what they're seeing, but by what is around them as well," Rodriguez said Dec. 16, one day after receiving the go-ahead from Miami Beach's Planning Board to pursue his concept for a theater and lounge. Rodriguez needed board approval because he wants to serve alcohol.

Rodriguez said he isn't replacing the Paris Theater's daytime operations as a studio, but is adding a new, night-time component to supplement declining business from the photo and movie market, which he said is "wiped out."

Paris Theater has previously been operated as a nightclub, but Rodriguez stresses that he's not creating a DJ-driven dancehall.

He said he plans only minor renovations, and the segmented studios in the building will be opened up to create one lounge and theater area.

"Right now we have furniture changes, props, and sets. Basically, it's going to be a studio as it is now," he said. "When Ralph Lauren comes in now, we change sets. It's the same thing we always do, except all of the sudden there's an audience sitting in the middle of it."

His project is still in its infancy, but ideas swirl in his head.

Rodriguez talks about establishing a creative entertainment venue inside the 26,000-square-foot, historic 1935 building, which he purchased in 1992 for just under \$1 million in order to create a studio for the film and photo industry.

Since then, artists from Madonna, to U2, to the Red Hot Chili Peppers have used the studio, an aspect Rodriguez hopes will add to the energy and allure of the venue.

Rodriguez says international performers could come for a three-month stint, or entertainment could consist of 15 to 20-minute vignettes. Celebrity chefs may come for a stay and the theater's big screen may be unfurled as eye candy.

He still plans to open for special events, which in the past have included fashion shows and poker nights.

With about 10 months before the next tourist season begins, Rodriguez says his main focus is getting the word out about his new project and recruiting talent. He said he leaves Christmas Day for a trip to London and Paris, and later to New York.

"From now until September it's all about coming up with ideas," he said, "and seeing what's out there and seeing what's coming our way."

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