

New cinema, bowling alley let light in at Masonic temple near SLU

By Stacey Rynders

A mere decade ago, the Grand Center area consisted of little more than the Fox Theatre and St. Louis University faculty and students. Now, after years of campus expansion, the construction of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, the relocation of the Greenburg Van Doren gallery, the rehabilitation of the historic Continental Building, the opening of new eateries and a coffee house and a series of renovation projects by Amy and Amrit Gill, Grand Center is becoming one of the hottest areas in St. Louis.

The completion of the Moolah Temple at 3821 Lindell Blvd. solidifies the area's reputation as a destination spot.

The former Masonic temple now houses a single-screen theater with love seat, balcony and stadium seating for 500, a retro eight-lane bowling alley and grill, in addition to 40 living units. The \$17.2 million project, headed by the Gills, includes an adjoining parking garage with more than 800 spaces that also serve tenants in the Gills' other properties in Midtown.

The Moolah officially opens with an invitation-only party on Jan. 20 and adds to the Gills' notoriety as "building huggers," as Amy proudly labels herself and her husband.

"We like to build neighborhoods," Amy said. "If you build that kind of excitement, you build a district. That's how you build the city back — one neighborhood at a time."

The Moolah Temple was built in 1913 by the Moolah Shriners and has

sat vacant for nearly 20 years since the group's relocation to Creve Coeur in 1988.

The Moorish designs of the building, both inside and out, have been reconstructed back to their original look, enhancing the unique architectural appeal of the temple. "People don't go to a city to look at a high rise," Amy said. "They want to see beautiful old architectural wonders."

Restoration St. Louis, the Gills' main company, completed the project in just 12 months despite the Moolah's serious state of dilapidation and the complex series of modifications needed to make the building suitable to house two loud commercial venues — a movie theater and a bowling alley — alongside residential space.

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Dana Kuhn photo

The Moolah Temple is a mixture of various exotic architectural styles.



Dana Kuhn photo

Harman Moseley (left) takes ticket stubs from patrons at the newly opened Moolah cinema.

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Acoustical engineering worth \$2 million was put in to the building, Amy said. "We didn't want to ruin this theater," said Amy, referring to the cavernous central space in a building that was once used for Masonic ceremonial purposes. The building has very few windows and required extra ones to be added for the residential units.

Although not a historic landmark in its own right, the temple is part of the Midtown Historic District.

The Moolah Shriners moved to a new building in West County, following the population, said Bill Addison, a spokesman for the group. The Shriners' membership was 12,000 at the time and it had outgrown the Midtown facility, he said.

The building was sold to TRiSTAR, a company that wanted to redevelop it as an office space. That venture failed and the building was essentially untouched until the Gills bought it for \$800,000 in April 2002.

Like all of the Gills' restoration projects, great care was taken to keep as much original architecture as possible, and this is noticeable even in the bathrooms, which feature marble stalls from local quarries that closed long ago.

The Moolah Temple, with its ornate grand entrance and intricate doorways, is a luxurious visual wonder in Midtown St. Louis, located a few steps from the Gills' most recent landmark renovation: the opulent Coronado that was completed in 2003.

Silver screen

When choosing tenants, the Gills put forth the same exacting care that they take with preserving St. Louis' architecture.

Local independent movie theater guru Harman Moseley was solicited to run the Moolah's single-screen theater, which in an age of multiplexes seems an almost Paleolithic business venture. However, Moseley is known for taking chances on theater ideas that others consider impractical or near-impossible — a sentiment that the Gills are accustomed to hearing about many of their own projects. Moseley's recent cinema successes include revitalizing the Galleria 6 Cinemas and opening the five-screen cinema within the Chase Park Plaza Hotel.

Like the Chase, the Moolah Temple is an elegant venue for a movie theater and includes a luxurious cocktail and lounge area where wine, martini and beer purchases can be made (drinks can be taken into the cinema). And the lounge area with its plush love seats and chairs makes the pre-show waits far cozier than usual.

Inside the theater, movie goers have a choice of leather sofas, stadium or balcony seating. And at the top of the large theater, an inset dome is aglow with changing fiber-optics.

Despite the glitzy decorating and splendid architectural setting, the Moolah retains an old movie-house ambiance. The doors open directly onto the concession stand where tickets can be purchased. The ushers kindly open the acoustically sound-resistant doors when the theater is prepared for viewing. And since there aren't seven other films showing at about the same time, the hustle and bustle of the lobby is more

reminiscent of a classy wine bar or playhouse.

Yet this unique movie-viewing experience is intended for all.

"It's for the poorest college student to elite clientele," said Julia Moseley, Harman's daughter and business partner in the project. "It's absurd to have an elegant space and students not be able to enjoy it."

In terms of serious competition there is the Tivoli and Hi-Pointe, which are both operated by Landmarks Cinemas and have a similar old-world charm. But, despite

earlier rumors that the Moolah Theater would be offering more art-house fare, the theater is committed to mainstream first-run movies, Julia said. The theater's first offering was the star-studded comedy *Meet the Fockers*, followed by another Hollywood film, *In Good Company*.

Moseley will use his theater to host the Cinema St. Louis Academy Awards this year but also hopes to attract lecture series, fashion shows or possibly live music acts to rent the space, Julia said.

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