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What's New in Tucson? A 150-room boutique hotel called The Leo Kent will open in Tucson's tallest skyscraper, a previously shuttered office building, in April 2023. It's just one example of how Tucson's downtown is undergoing a revival that focuses on the adaptive reuse of buildings.

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Meet Teatro Carmen's Revivalist: Herb Stratford

On a recent morning, our team stands outside the aging Teatro Carmen, an abandoned 1915 building in the heart of one of Tucson's oldest neighborhoods, Barrio Viejo. It's there that we're greeted by Herb Stratford – a man whose love for restoring theatres is only dwarfed by his love of film. Co-founder and director of Film Fest Tucson, Stratford was hand-picked to restore Teatro Carmen to its former grandeur, as a 300ish seat theatre that serves as an entertainment and community hub in downtown Tucson. Based on his impeccable track record – he restored the 1930 crown jewel Fox Theatre in downtown Tucson – we have no doubt he's the man for the job, though this undertaking is much different than previous endeavors.

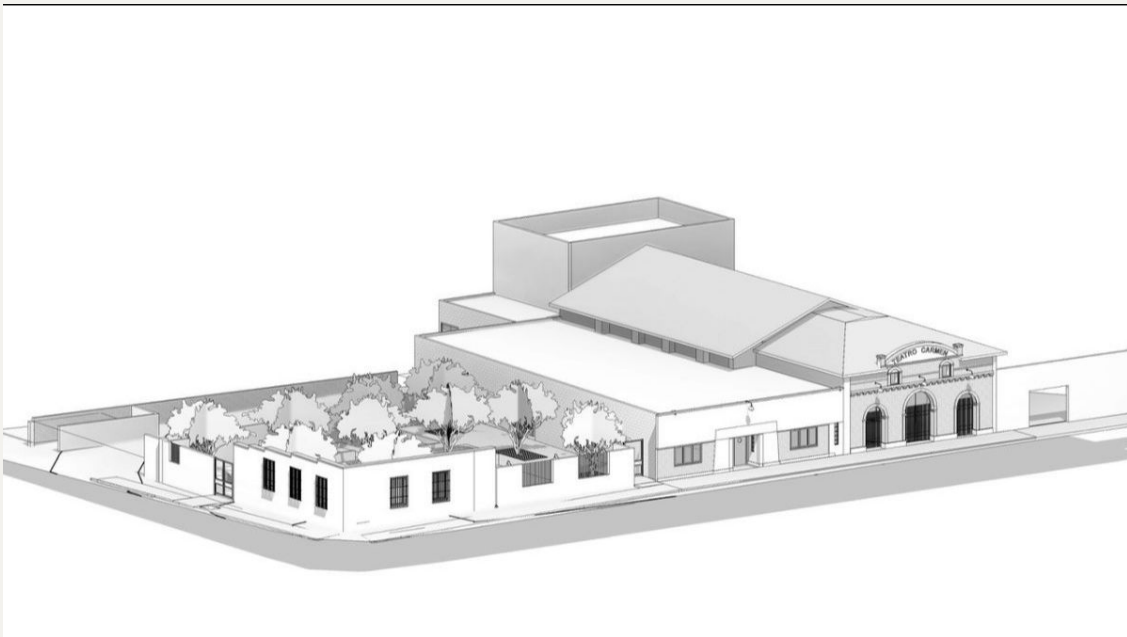
For one, he explains to us, pictures and history of that timeframe are hard to come by. While today Barrio Viejo is the foremost example of a Mexican barrio in the U.S. and one of Tucson's premier neighborhoods, that reputation is

relatively new. When Barrio Viejo was built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was inhabited mostly by migrants of Mexican descent who were poor and, in many instances, overlooked. This was certainly the case for the theatre, which despite Stratford's fastidious research of the site, revealed no interior pictures of the space. For that reason, Teatro Carmen's restoration will require a bit more creative license than Stratford's previous projects. But Stratford assures us he is up for the challenge.

The theatre opened in May of 1915, with its inaugural comedy "Cerebro y Corazón" by Mexican female playwright Teresa Farías de Isasi. Five years later, the Sonora Opera Company performed Verdi's "Aida" there, which was reviewed by the daily newspaper as having "a brilliant finish." Then in 1926, the theatre was sold, and took on many new identities, before settling in as the Pilgrim Rest Elks Lodge No. 601, a black social club, from 1937 to 1986.

The Blacks Elks Club were the longest tenants of the building, a fact that is not lost on Stratford, who has hung up two black and white prints of its members on the façade of the building. His intent is to not only honor the building's history as Carmen Teatro, but the Elks Club. How he'll do that has yet to be determined, but he assures us it will occur.

The interior of today's theatre is a blank slate, speckled with remnants from the past. The floor is flat, not slanted, as you would find in most theaters, and there's not a chair in sight. A peeling tin ceiling of ornate patterns hangs above, something that Stratford would love to repair and restore, though he knows the paint may contain lead. A historic bar with a foot rail sits in the corner, likely the second oldest in Tucson, according to Stratford.



The theatre is not the only building that Stratford will be restoring. Teatro Carmen shares a wall with a space that used to be the frequent meeting place for the social club, and there's a large exterior dirt lot that was the one-time home of a now destroyed Chinese grocery store, one of more than a dozen you would have found in Barrio Viejo in the early 20th century. Barrio Viejo, after all, was a giant melting pot of a neighborhood that welcomed anyone who was economically disadvantaged or racially discriminated against. The Chinese immigrants who settled in Arizona, largely due to the railroad expansion and food service industry, were both.

Stratford says the social club building will be converted into a restaurant managed by a local restaurateur (he's already meeting with Tucson chefs to discuss concept ideas), and the exterior lot will serve as an oversized patio for dining al fresco (a longtime Tucson tradition that far pre-dates the pandemic).

Standing between Stratford and his vision of reviving the space is a \$6 million price tag. But he'll get there, he says. And we know he will. Stratford is deeply connected and respected in the community.

Through a non-profit, he's already raised nearly half of the funds, which he'll put toward restoring the façade of the deteriorating building. In the few exterior

images of the building that Stratford has managed to unearth, the building is brick-faced, a stark contrast from the tan plaster on the outside of the building today. Where there are two arched windows today, there were archways with doors, something that Stratford hopes to correct. And he'd like to recreate the historic Teatro Carmen sign seen in the image, a much grander version than the hand painted one on the exterior of today's theatre.

His timeline for restoring the façade of the buildings is the end of the year, an aggressive goal that we don't doubt. After all, Stratford is a man whose ambition has always been met with success, a fact he rarely divulges but one that's not lost on our team.

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