



INTERVIEW: RIALTO PROFILE – REOPENING DOWNTOWN, JANUARY 2018

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Downtown theater emerges from extended vacancy as exciting new event venue

A space familiar to longtime residents and passersby is set to reopen its doors in the coming new year. With renovations to the historic **Rialto** theater in the heart of Downtown Bozeman well under way, local event-seekers will soon have the choice of a brand new venue featuring an exciting lineup of top-tier talent from around the country.

Originally built in 1908 as a two-story storefront and converted into a theater in 1924, the Rialto has a long history of serving Main Street in Bozeman's central commercial district, although it has been vacant for more than a decade. The theater's redesign comes courtesy of ThinkTank Design Group's collaboration with North Fork Builders. The Rialto is owned by a group of local partners and managed by Columbia Hospitality, the same Seattle-based company behind The Lark.

In anticipation of its forthcoming launch, the Rolling Zone sat down with the Rialto's **Drew Fleming**, Production & Operations Manager, and **Matt Beehler**, General Manager, for a discussion about the theater's complete restoration and plans to aggrandize Bozeman's distinctive cultural scene.

RZ: The Rialto is reopening in just a few short months. How are renovations shaping up behind the sidewalk sheds?

DF: Thus far, things are going well. We're slated for a mid-January opening.

RZ: The space has undergone numerous changes since its initial construction early last century. When the doors officially open, can Bozemanites expect to find a contemporary honoring of past Rialto iterations?

DF: The Rialto will be a completely renovated, state of the art theater in a historic downtown building. We see that as the best of both worlds. The outside is being renovated to look like it did when it opened in the 20s, kind of a throwback to that Art Deco style, complete with ticket booth, awning and marquee (the latter designed by local artist and metal sculptor Erik “Ole” Nelson of Media Station). Attendees will find aesthetics harkening the past throughout the space in the décor.

RZ: Bozeman obviously loves its live entertainment. What does this space offer that might not be found anywhere else?

DF: The Rialto’s sound and lighting will be second to none. The production is top of the line and one hundred percent dialed-in. We’ve put a lot of thought into the theatrical lighting. We’re also looking forward to implementing pixel mapping technology in house, a new trend of live lighting. The sound was acoustically designed by Charles M. Salter Associates out of California, the same firm that designed the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. The Rialto is basically a building built inside a building, so acoustically speaking, the design has been well thought out. We’re happy with what’s been done in there, and are eager to share it with the community.

RZ: How did the new ownership come to the decision to reopen the Rialto?

MB: The story is really not that much different from The Lark’s. This space turned into something the town wasn’t proud of, more of a blight. With Bozeman evolving and expanding, the thought was to do something that would add to the cultural milieu, so we ripped the building down to the studs and rebuilt it up to what it is today. This model promotes Main Street, one of the coolest streets in America.



People have memories of going through the Rialto as a kid, with their grandparents, watching movies in junior high and high school. It's sat dormant for ten-plus years. What a shame. The history behind the Rialto has been an opportunity. This isn't us tearing it out and putting in something brand new. That's the challenge — it's a box within a box within a shoebox. To make this what it is today is really, really impressive.

RZ: And what does the new ownership envision for *this* Rialto's presentation of entertainment, culture, and the like?

DF: The owners want a place for the community to be able to gather together to experience live music, dance, theater, spoken word, visual arts, film — a full spectrum of the arts. They envision a space for the people of Bozeman to go and witness something meaningful. They want to give back, putting something downtown our community deserves. This has been a tremendous opportunity to bring the Rialto back to what it was known for — entertainment and the arts.

MB: And that vision comes from a passion for the community. It would be really easy for us to bring in a bunch of really cool bands, and we're doing that, but we see the Rialto as more of a launching point for arts and culture in the community. We're going to make sure it's approachable [with] ticket prices that run the gamut, all-ages shows and those that are 18+. We're also really trying to hit every genre, picking acts that will resonate and click, but at the same time, picking those that will expose people to something they maybe hadn't been exposed to before. Dalton Brink, our Artistic Director, is doing a great job curating content so that the community trusts we've got our finger on the pulse.

RZ: The Rialto will begin hosting events before at the start of the new year. Can you give us a preview of the initial event slate? Is there some sort of grand opening celebration on the calendar?

DF: We have some great opening shows planned. Hippo Campus is first up on January 16th, world-renowned jazz musicians the Victor Wooten

Trio the next night, and Brett Dennen on the 21st. Then we have two touring acts we're excited to bring to Bozeman — Car Seat Headrest on the 26th and Reggie Watts the following evening. We're also planning a community opening party to be able to invite everyone in to see what we've been doing. We're going to bring in some local talent, have lots of schwag giveaways, ticket packages, complimentary drinks and light appetizers. This welcoming event is tentatively set for February, so check our website or sign up for our email alerts to learn more about attending. We really want to involve the community as much as possible because, ultimately, this is *their* place.

RZ: Let's talk boxes. The Rialto will feature three — the Black Box, the Burn Box, and the Light Box — to ensure all parts of the building are utilized. Tell us a little about these spaces.

DF: The Black Box “theater,” so to speak, is our main entertainment venue for large shows, but is also available for private parties. The Light Box is a second, smaller event space rental. This space is perfect for seminars, corporate events and private parties. The Burn Box is a second-floor bar looking out over downtown with open access. Even if you don't have a ticket to the show, you can head up for a drink or bite. The Burn Box will be an opportunity to come enjoy yourself at the Rialto, regardless of what's going on in the theater.

MB: The “Burn Box,” which was the projector room, was named that because of the highly explosive, flammable materials used in film back then. It was literally built as a burn box in the beginning. We're literal with the naming of the rooms, considering the skylight over the Light Box, and the Black Box downstairs. Beyond the shows and theater, having the Burn Box bar is a major draw. We'll have guests on an event night just there to have a great cocktail and some amazing food. We want to have all spaces activated, [each] with different content. It would be fun on certain nights to mix things up where you've got some jazz going on in the Burn Box, an alt-rock concert going on downstairs, and totally different engagement up in the Light Box, having those worlds converge with people interacting and mingling. The goal is to be accessible to the public

in a variety of ways.



RZ: Most people will remember the Rialto being one of Bozeman's three original movie theaters, and while more of a live performance venue, are there plans to still show films?

DF: At this point, our plan is to make Sundays film days. Starting with some family movies in the morning, we'll be moving into more eclectic indie films later in the day with Bozeman Film Society. We're also working with the Bozeman Doc Series to showcase some of the great documentaries they bring to town. There might be a circumstance where we just

can't pass up a touring band coming through, but we're going to try and make movie Sundays a weekly thing. And worth noting schedule-wise, we're shooting for Wednesdays to be our local band showcase night. So, if you're downtown mid-week, know you can come see a local band at the Rialto. While there are still a few details up in the air, following us on social media or signing up for our newsletters will be the best way to keep informed on what's going on at Rialto.

RZ: Despite the "social" elements of the digital age, we seem to be living in an isolating time where most people are glued to a screen. Why is, say, going to a live show with friends an important experience to uphold?

DF: There's a lot of talk about that these days. Going to a live show or event is experiencing something real, first-hand, and being in the moment with friends, with family — with strangers. Even at concerts, people are constantly videotaping. Sometimes it's disheartening to see that because, in a way, you're missing what the experience really is. I think it's time the human race starts to appreciate that again, that real experience.

RZ: Obviously its production quality serves as reason enough to visit, but why should people make the Rialto their go-to venue for live entertainment after — or during — a long workweek?

MB: People who visit the Rialto will have the chance to proudly be part of a local, homegrown product that celebrates this community. And they get to do it right here on Main Street. Too many of us have had to travel to Missoula, Seattle, or Portland. We're looking to develop that scene here and have something people from the area can call theirs. In terms of service, we want to provide that signature Rialto experience every time people walk through the door. Hopefully by the time our guests leave, they'll have felt what that is and will be proud to refer friends and family. So, let us host you. Let us entertain you. Come explore different facets of the art world.

RZ: Do you have a message for your downtown neighbors?

MB: We want to *add* to the community, to promote local business and the common good of all its stakeholders, whether they're nonprofits or small businesses. You can be sure on a night with four hundred people going to a concert at the Rialto, the majority of these downtown restaurants, distilleries, breweries and coffee shops are going to be full. It's not just about us, but also the community and those invested in Main Street. That's tremendous. We also want to support what's already going on around here. A lot of times we'll just be opening the doors to host fundraisers and functions for the numerous nonprofits doing a ton of good in the valley. We're not just doing all the cool, sexy rock shows, but also making sure we have an impact in the community.

RZ: Opening up and getting things rolling is most likely the focus right now, but what are the sort of long-term aspirations for the Rialto's future in Bozeman?

DF: There are venues all over the U.S. that aren't huge, but are so well-loved for their approach, attention to detail, and love of the art. We hope that the Rialto, in time, becomes one of these places that brings people

together. We're dedicated to throwing some fine artists out there for Bozeman to help us grow and gain a reputation. We would love to see the Rialto become not just a regional hotspot, but known nationally as a catalyst for arts and culture and a place where great acts happen.

The Rialto *reopens* its doors to a fresh and innovative experience in January. Get further acquainted with this exciting new event space and cultural center at www.rialtoboze.com, where you can also peruse inaugural happenings and buy advance tickets. Follow the Rialto on Facebook for the most up to date event announcements, @therialto. We'll catch you downtown in early 2018! •