

When the sleek, art-deco Winston Theatre on West Fourth Street was renovated into offices for lawyers and architects in the early 1980s, it was hailed by its new owners as a sign of progress and downtown revitalization.

The Winston Theatre opened in 1949 with *A Kiss in the Dark*, a romantic comedy starring Jane Wyman and David Niven. Lengthy newspaper articles and photographs detailed the new theater from its sound, heating and air-conditioning systems down its 1,000 seats, carpeting and the ladies' lounge. By 1978, it was operating as a second-run cinema, showing films for \$1. By 1981, it was closed.

When Aperture Cinema, a two-screen theater concentrating on independent and art-house films, opens this weekend on West Fourth Street, it's likely that it will also be seen as a stirring in downtown's awakening — this time, though, the movie screens, projectors and popcorn machine are replacing offices.

It will also be the first time in almost 30 years that movies will be shown at a space dedicated to cinema in downtown. It's been so long that Lawren Desai, the 33-year-old majority owner of Aperture, doesn't remember going to see movies regularly at a downtown theater — and she grew up here.

Not so long ago, things were a lot different. In 1952, there were at least five movie theaters in downtown Winston-Salem, according to an article in *The Sentinel*, an afternoon newspaper that closed in 1985.

North Carolina downtowns thrived through the 1950s, said Robert Allen, an American Studies professor at UNC Chapel Hill who has researched old theaters across the state (including a database and history of theaters at www.docsouth.unc.edu/gtts). And when people went downtown, they usually went to the movies.

"It didn't matter if downtown had two blocks or 22 blocks," Allen said. "You went to the movies because you had something else to do downtown. So you would have to go to the soda shop afterward, or shopping."

In those Jim Crow days, theaters geared toward blacks were usually outside of city centers, located in black neighborhoods, Allen said. Even when theaters started to integrate, renovations — like those at the Colonial on Liberty Street, later re-named the Center — included balconies to keep audiences separate.

But as businesses moved out to the 'burbs, downtown movie theaters lost their audiences to newer multiplexes and television. Downtown theaters closed or struggled, giving up on first-run features and switching to X-rated or second-run films. Some were re-born as primarily performing-arts venues. In Winston-Salem, the Carolina became the Stevens Center. Recently, indie films were screened there as part of the "Films on Fourth" series. Others, like the Winston, look unrecognizable today, stripped of their grand marquees and flashy neon. Go look: it's the white building across from Foothills Brewery.

"Shopping centers followed the path of residential suburbanization," Allen said. "That's when downtown movie theaters began to fail, because they were not supported by big stores."

The State, one of Winston-Salem's most well-known theaters, was built in 1903 on the corner of West Fifth and Liberty streets. It presented vaudeville acts, opera, music and plays in addition to films. Will Rogers and Gene Autry graced its stage. It closed in 1952 and became a furniture store, but even that eventually moved out.

They're all gone now: the Winston, the State, the Amuzu, the Lafayette. The Lincoln was condemned in 1966, then torn down in the name of urban renewal. The Center came down in 1972, making way for a parking deck.

"For so long, going to a movie downtown wasn't just seeing another film. It was an experience in the old Hollywood, the gilded, rococo days of cheap popcorn, newsreels, dollar admissions and ladies' lounges," lamented a July 1981 article in the *Winston-Salem Journal*.

Desai wants to do things differently. Call it quieter, on a more human — and she hopes — a more sustainable scale. There's no grand marquee or ornate facade. But in addition to Aperture's menu of arty and foreign films, movie-goers will be able to chase their popcorn and Milk Duds with pinot noir and cava, Spanish sparkling wine. Everything is scaled down — smaller screens, no stadium seating, no video games in the lobby — all geared to a more intimate show. There are just

two theaters and 161 seats. Flat-screen televisions will play previews in windows along Fourth Street, but there is history here, too: Grape-vine molding still ripples on some walls from the building's days as Montaldo's, a high-fashion clothing store. The space at 311 W. Fourth St. was most recently offices belonging to Desai's father's architectural firm, Walter, Robbs, Callahan and Pierce.

"I think it's a different time. I think there's a movement to be downtown and do things downtown," Desai said.

"Things change so quickly," she added. "I hope we're around in 10 years."

RiverRun International Film Festival will screen films here throughout the year. Desai plans to hold special events for cinephiles; last week, she was thinking about which nostalgic, romantic film to show on Valentine's Day.

Aperture's ticket prices are comparable to other local theaters â€” \$8.50 for adults, \$7 for students and seniors and \$6.50 for matinees. Screenings will be seven days a week, with more shows on the weekend.

Up first? Aperture will open Friday with *A Town Called Panic*, a Belgian stop-motion animation film, (it's kid- and adult-friendly, but yes, there are subtitles, so you have to be old enough to read); *New York, I Love You*, a series of shorts written like a collection of love poems to the city that never sleeps; and *An Education*, a coming-of-age story that recently snagged a Golden Globe nomination for actress Carey Mulligan's portrayal of a teenage girl in 1960s London.

Others films booked for January are *The Messenger* (an Iraqi war vet is assigned to the Army's casualty notification duty); and *The Maid* (an Argentine family's longtime housekeeper fights to keep her job). Go to www.aperturecinema.com for trailers and show times or call 722-8148.



Art-house movies will come to downtown when aperture cinema opens its doors on Friday.