

Often called the “City of Arts,” Winston-Salem is home to the largest film festival in the state and one of the most renowned collegiate film-making programs in the country. Thanks to Lawren Desai, her hometown will now offer an art house theater experience, too.

Desai is the mastermind behind, and now curator of, the downtown cinema, to be called a/perture, which plans to begin showing independent, art-house and foreign films in January. The twin-screen theater will also serve as a showcase venue for local filmmakers — including students at the nearby [UNC-School of the Arts](#) — and will house the new base of operations for the RiverRun International Film Festival.

Film selection won't be the only element to distinguish a/perture from the city's multiplex cinemas. Patrons will purchase tickets and concessions from the same counter before heading into one of two intimate 80-seat theaters. Desai also plans to feature local beers and Yadkin Valley wines on her concessions menu.

Before returning to the Triad and earning her MBA from [Wake Forest University](#), Desai worked in several sectors of the film industry in New York and Los Angeles. She says she developed a strong passion for the non-mainstream films that frequented the art house circuits and has since longed to incorporate that sense of enthusiasm for film back into the heart of Winston-Salem.

How did you enter the film business?

After college, I decided to apply for an internship with a small film company in California. I was fortunate enough to be accepted and ended up getting a great job out there after the internship ended. I fell in love with the industry and the films that were being made, and I've stuck with it ever since.

What sparked the idea to build a theater?

I believe it came from my experience in New York and LA. I have grown to love the independent, smaller films that make their way through those art house circuits, and when this space became available, I knew we had an opportunity to make those films available to the community here.

Why the name a/perture?

The aperture is the hole through which light enters a camera. So we wanted a unique name that incorporated the idea of filmography and movie-making. The slash was added to reflect the style in which apertures are written.

What makes Winston-Salem the ideal location for a/perture?

We have a city that is known historically for its devotion to the arts. Especially considering we host River Run every year, there is clearly an appreciation for independent films in this region and people who are looking for a place to show those films.

What has been the biggest challenge you've faced on this venture?

It has been difficult to convince everyone that this will work. There a lot of people who want a theater like this, but you have to convince some that this is a good business plan.

Considering the struggling economy, why launch this venture now?

Many say the movie business is recession-proof, so I'm hoping those believers are right. But I do think you'll always have people who are willing to spend a little to go see a great film, especially ones they can't necessarily see somewhere else.

What will set this theater apart from your competitors?

Obviously the movies we show and our concessions are different, but our location is also critical. All the other theaters are on the edges of the city, and I wanted to bring everyone back downtown. I think you'll see people taking advantage of the opportunity to see a film and spend the evening in the heart of the city.

What benefit do you expect from joining with RiverRun?

We are really excited to share the space with RiverRun because it will give them an opportunity to host some of their festival films and events year-round and in turn we hope that their loyal patrons will consider a/perture as a place to come watch films outside of the annual RiverRun International Film Festival.

How do plan to select the films you will show?

We will look for films from several different places. We'll try to find some from local filmmakers, some from the more well-known art house circuits and we may even bring back some old films that played years ago.

What is your favorite movie?

I would have to say "Amélie." When I first saw that movie, it was just so quirky and different. It has always been one of favorites.

Who is your favorite director?

I don't know that I have a favorite. I think the story and the characters make the movie more than the directors. I enjoy movies that revolve around great stories.

Do you prefer living in the hustle and bustle of NYC and LA or here in Winston-Salem?

When I was younger and living in those big cities, I liked being there. But now that I'm a little older and have a family, I'm very glad to be back here.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

I would love to still be running this theater and be surrounded by a bigger, more bustling downtown and a community that has an even greater appreciation for film.

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