



## Persistence of vision: A/PERTURE CINEMA A 'PERFECT MARRIAGE' FOR DESAI

By Keith Barber. Published August 26, 2009

Lawren Desai stood inside the empty office space that once housed an architecture firm in its most recent iteration and shared her vision of an art-house theater located on West Fourth Street in downtown Winston-Salem.

"Just walking downtown, I realized that's what's missing," Desai said. "That was really the inspiration — not any one particular moment. I've always been interested and it seemed like the right time for it downtown."

Desai, a graduate of Wake Forest University's School of Business Management, said A/perture Cinema represents the "perfect marriage" of her interest in business and filmmaking.

"My friends and family thought it was a perfect thing for me to do, to bring my interest in film and my business experience," she said. "When I told people [my plans] they were not shocked."

For Desai, finding her true calling meant trying a number of cities and careers before returning home, getting her MBA and meeting her husband, Jigar, in graduate school. A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania with a degree in international relations, Desai said that in those in-between years she led a nomadic life. She moved to Los Angeles and pursued a career in film production in 1998. One year later, she returned home to work as an assistant to Dale Pollock, former dean of the School of Filmmaking at the UNC School of the Arts. All the while, Desai said she was planning on going to the University of Southern California to get her master's degree in film production, but working with Pollock changed her mind. Her friends encouraged her to make her own short film, and she achieved her goal. Then, Desai packed her bags for New York to pursue her filmmaking dreams in the Big Apple. Two years later, she found herself working as a merchandiser for a Swiss watchmaker.

Although she enjoyed the perks of extensive travel, Desai said she couldn't let go of her film dreams. So she entered graduate school in a discipline that was practical yet film-related.

After meeting Jigar and falling in love, her husband got a job with Lincoln Financial's Greensboro office, which cemented Lawren's decision to stay in the area and create a life in Winston-Salem. During her walks downtown with friends and family, Lawren openly lamented the lack of an art-house movie theater. She often spoke of talented UNC School of the Arts film graduates like David Gordon Green and Ben Best, whose films played in large cities but never found their way to Winston-Salem.

"When they come back, there isn't a dedicated theater for them to show their work, whether it's a Hollywood film or an independent film," Desai observed.

Desai then led a small tour of the hollowed-out facility and spoke of the theater's prime location — a stone's throw from the Stevens Center.

"You can't get a better location, especially if we're trying to become the City of the Arts," Desai said. "This is the core of the theater district. You can't call yourself that without a movie theater here, especially with the film community we have here." A/perture Cinema — the name was inspired by an f-stop setting on a film camera — will showcase independent films on two screens with 160 seats. The theater will offer beer, wine and "a whole bunch of movies you've probably never heard of," Desai said. A/perture is scheduled to open in January.

The River Run International Film Festival will share the space with A/perture Cinema, and the collaboration won't stop there. A/perture will be an official venue of the festival, held every year in Winston-Salem. A/perture will also screen River Run movies year-round, and even plans on showing some independent films that don't make it into the festival. Desai she also hopes to screen UNC School of the Arts student films at A/perture.

Desai will enjoy perhaps the best perk of her position as theater owner when she attends the Toronto International Film Festival next month to find cinematic diamonds in the rough.

I want to open with some good movies, and Toronto is the best festival for exhibitors to decide which films to show," she said.