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FEATURED

Wanna get hitched? Peabody Square's now the place

By Ethan Forman Staff Writer 16 hrs ago



This early 20th-century postcard depicts how the Strand Theatre fit on Main Street in downtown Peabody. The theater space being converted into the Olio event venue. Photo courtesy of the Peabody Historical Society

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PEABODY — Downtown Peabody probably does not come to mind when brides-to-be are thinking of a wedding venue.

The city, of course, has the Boston Marriott Peabody on Centennial Drive and the popular and historic Smith Barn of the Peabody Historical Society. But neither spot operates in the shadow of City Hall.

And the North Shore also offers any number of function facilities, conference centers, hotels, estates, churches, synagogues, country clubs, social halls and barns for rent. Even Danvers is converting its hay barn at Endicott Park into an event space.

But with the city pushing to revitalize the downtown, a mother-and-daughter team from MetroWest saw something in the rundown former Strand Theatre building at 43 Main St.

Knowing there is a gap in the market for large spaces that can be fashioned however a couple wants, the women are investing more than \$1.5 million to create an event venue called Olio.

They are converting a building mostly recently used for storage and an estate sale business into a 6,000-square-foot event space for more than 400 guests.

Inside the former theater space, there are soaring concrete walls and exposed wooden beams in the ceiling.

And that's it.

Bring in some hay bales, and you have a barn wedding. Bring in some drapery, and you can add a "lux" feeling to your nuptials. It's meant to be a blank canvas.

The addition of Olio brings to three the number of event venues in and around Peabody Square.

The other two spaces are the Black Box Theater at Northeast Arc's Arcworks Community Art Center in the old post office building at 22 Foster St., and the recently renovated Wiggin Auditorium, a former opera house on the second floor of City Hall, 24 Lowell St.

The investment at 43 Main St. is the kind city officials had envisioned in their push to revitalize Peabody Square.

"Forty-three Main Street is yet another long-vacant building being redeveloped by successful entrepreneurs," Mayor Ted Bettencourt said in a statement. "This was our vision when we leveraged two state grants to redesign Main Street and Peabody Square, streamline downtown traffic and create a more pedestrian and business-friendly cityscape. Olio Peabody is a great addition to a revitalized downtown that now features several new restaurants, a brewery, 20 new apartments, and our very own community theater, the Black Box."

Narcus said Olio will work in concert with the Black Box Theater and the Wiggin. She is familiar with Lisa Geczi, the event planner who plans events for the Black Box, Peabody Main Streets and the Wiggin.

"I don't consider it competition," Narcus said. "And what you want is for people to see downtown Peabody as a destination, and that's part of what we are doing here, and part of what those other spaces are providing."

"We're actually excited a second space is opening up in the downtown," said Tim Brown, director of innovation and strategy for Northeast Arc, who helps oversee initiatives such as the Black Box Theater and the Breaking Grounds Cafe, a few doors down from 43 Main St.

"I think each space is different from each other," Brown said. With the downtown offering different event venues, it gives people different options, so there is a chance they will stay downtown. The Black Box Theater also has people looking at it for weddings. It's booked through the middle of March for performances and other events, Brown added.

"I think anytime you can draw folks downtown is a positive thing," Planning and Community Development Director Curt Bellavance said. He found the new and different use for the building exciting. And parking, Bellavance said, should not be a problem. There are a half dozen parking lots within a block or two from Olio.

Now is the time to invest in downtown Peabody, Narcus said. The building has an existing ground-floor restaurant tenant, Maki Sushi Bar & Grill, which plans to expand in the building.

"That's the economic development angle for me," Narcus said, "is that we spent ... a year closing on this property, months and months researching what's happening in Peabody and talking to literally everybody, everyone on this street, everyone at City Hall, every department. What's happening now? Where's Peabody going and do we want to put our money, our effort into downtown?"

A million-dollar investment

Narcus said they are already booking events starting Memorial Day weekend through 2020.

Olio is owned by Narcus, 31, of Framingham, and her mother, Ellen Basch, 57, of Lexington. Narcus is a new mom to her daughter Andrea, aged 2 months.

The team purchased the building in October for \$550,000, and they are investing another \$1 million into it, but they have been interested in buying it since October 2017 when they first toured it.

Narcus owns an event planning company called Without a Hitch, which does 30 to 50 weddings a year. She has been at this business for about six years. She started planning events in the nonprofit industry in 2004.

Over the years, she saw a gap existed in the market for event spaces in which couples could fashion a space anyway they wanted.

The facility is meant for people to bring in their own caterers, florists, photographers and DJs, so this will also stimulate the local Peabody economy.

More on the Strand

The building, more than 100 years old, has a rich history as the former Strand Theatre, though it does not look like much, today. Olio's website traces the building's history, thanks to help from the Peabody Historical Society.

The building, built from 1910 to 1912, is considered one of the first buildings made entirely of concrete in the United States.

As a theater, it used to have a Vaudeville-style facade and large marquee, which was removed decades ago. The front corner of the left side of the building as you face it still has an art deco design on it. The theater closed in 1957, and since then it has been used as retail space.

Narcus and Basch found the upstairs theater space had been divided into two floors with hundreds of storage closets.

All of that has been ripped out, and the only thing the theater space will contain will be rooms for bathrooms and a prep kitchen. The walls will remain unfinished concrete.

"It was really a leap of faith to say, we can picture what's in there," Narcus said.

At the back of the building, the roof line is elevated by one story to accommodate the theater's former rigging and an olio drop curtain depicting a Victorian scene for the stage. That's where they got the name for the venue.