

New cinemas, new direction

The conversion of the shuttered World Playhouse and Studebaker Theaters from playhouses to luxury art moviehouses is a strong show of faith in the downtown area.

M&R Amusement will turn the legitimate theaters, side by side at 410 and 418 S. Michigan Ave., into outlets for tasteful film viewing and aptly rename them Fine Arts I and II. The Skokie-based operator has a proven record for innovation in its exclusive first-run and foreign showings and classics revivals at the Near North Side Sandburg Theater.

If it can do the same downtown, others may

follow the example, including those who have given up on the area. The trend in the Loop has been to close theaters or virtually to do the equivalent by surrendering them to questionable fare, then cry foul about profits. The firm's idea is to promote a "culture alley" along the boulevard, taking in nearby Orchestra Hall and the Auditorium Theater.

If the experiment works, quality restaurants and quality stores may be forthcoming. If the experiment fails, M&R can at least say it tried while others stood idly by. At stake here is far more than M&R's profitability—the future of the central area is on the line as well.