

2 new cinemas on Michigan Ave. planned

By Gene Siskel
Movie critic

DOWNTOWN MOVIEGOERS will get a special Christmas present with the expected announcement that M&R Amusement Co. will convert the shuttered World Playhouse and Studebaker Theater, side by side at 410 and 418 S. Michigan Ave., into luxury movie houses showing art films, The Tribune learned Tuesday.

The opening of two new theaters would break a decade-long trend of downtown movie houses closing, marked by the loss of the Oriental, Roosevelt, Loop, Shangri-La, Clark and Today theaters, as well as the recent announcement by the owners of the Chicago and State-Lake theaters that they are no longer profitable and are ready for redevelopment or the wrecker's ball.

M&R's idea is to turn South Michigan Avenue into a "culture alley," in which the new film houses would join existing homes for classical music and legitimate theater.

The theaters will be named the Fine Arts I and II and advertising will stress the easy availability of parking across the street in the Grant Park Garage.

M&R IS AN enlightened, aggressive and profitable exhibitor, based in Skokie, which has had great success with the operation of the Near North Side Sandburg Theatre, 1204 N. Dearborn St.

The company is likely to offer programming at variance with the dominant low-grade action fare currently offered at other downtown theaters. Booking first-run mainstream films or art pictures could answer the long-asked question about the entertainment scene downtown: Will changing the nature of the movies offered there entice the middle-class back to the Loop at night?

Tom Brueggemann, a spokesman for the theater chain, would neither confirm nor deny the conversion of the two theaters, rumors of which surfaced here following calls made by M&R executives to Hollywood distributors, promising "two new screens by Christmas."

Although no lease has been signed, a formal announcement of the plans is expected later this week.

The Studebaker previously was a legitimate theater, while the World Playhouse has served both as a legitimate theater and an art film house.