

Splendor restored

Long-neglected American Brewery building becomes a 'symbol of hope' for a blighted city neighborhood

By Jacques Kelly | Sun Reporter

August 18, 2008



Workers removed scaffolding from the old American Brewery's towers, revealing a 19th century exuberance of restored copper, slate, brick and brownstone.

Emerging from a \$21.2 million restoration, the East Baltimore landmark is ending 35 years of neglect and vacancy - and nail-biting about the fate of this vulnerable icon of Baltimore's industrial past.

"It is simply breathtaking," said C. William Struever, the Baltimore developer whose firm has the renovation-construction job and removed the scaffolding last week. "It's full of irreplaceable, idiosyncratic wonders."

The 1887 brew house sits atop a small hill at 1700 N. Gay St., just below North Avenue. Nearly 140 feet high, the building and its trio of towers are visible for blocks around.

"There were holes the size of a dining room table in the roof," said Stephen V. Hulse, a division manager for the contractor. "Rain would course through the building."

For the past 35 years the former American Brewery sat empty, owned by the city for much of that time. The blocks around the brewery were the subject of a series of articles in *The Sun* in 2006 that chronicled life in a blighted neighborhood that had lost more than half its population over three decades and was among the most violent in the city.

Next spring, Humanim, a 37-year-old Columbia-based nonprofit whose employees counsel clients to find jobs or obtain better ones, will occupy the site. Humanim has 650 employees, and 250 of them will transfer to the old brewery.

"This iconic building is a symbol of hope for us," said Cindy Truitt, Humanim's chief development officer. "In it, we saw the combination of the physical structure with the amazing human capital in this neighborhood. The neighborhood needs work-force development and has the motivation for change."

After the Allegheny Beverage Co. closed the plant in March 1973, the city bought it. Parts of the Gay Street complex were used in a 1980s anti-poverty program.

"As a student at the Maryland Institute in the 1970s, I would go over and draw and photograph the place," said George Holbeck, the architect whose firm, Cho Benn Holbeck, designed and is overseeing the brewery transformation. "Even then I said to myself, 'I want to do this building.' It is one of Baltimore's best historic monuments that hadn't been saved."

While a graduate student in architecture, he enlisted his brother, a city police officer, to help him gain entry to the locked structure. He toured the abandoned brewery when its boarded windows admitted little light.

"When we started doing the work last year, we found that despite its ornamented exterior, the brewery is really an industrial machine constructed around the grain silo, the conveyor belts and the heating kettles," he said.

Holbeck and his firm redesigned the interior to preserve the history of the brewing process. Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse, Humanim, the [Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation](#) and the Abell Foundation hatched out a financing mechanism for the daunting project. A variety of state and federal historic preservation tax credits also helped underwrite the restoration.

Over the spring and summer, masonry workers, using implements that resemble dental tools, inserted new mortar in the intricate brick and terra-cotta joints. They labored alongside slaters who installed diamond-shaped slate in fish-scales in five different sizes on roofs. Metalsmiths burnished much of the fanciful copper and sheet-metal detailing.

When an 1898 color lithographed calendar of the brewery indicated that it was once painted a mustard ocher, that tone of a yellowish brown was chosen - after years of being a dark green.

They also discovered a network of underground storage and cooling chambers - some as deep as three stories below the ground. Inside the building, the restoration found remaining old kettles, tanks and an agitator. These industrial remnants will be incorporated into

the new uses - a reception station, reading nooks and a conference glass-table base. Carpeting for the new work space will include diagrams of the brewing equipment's old footprints.

Hulse, the contractor's division manager, showed how a vertical conveyor belt drew 10,000 bushels of malt to a grain elevator in the tower - the signature part of the building that is so familiar on the East Baltimore skyline.

The brewing was done in tanks on the middle floors; the loading docks were on the first and second floors. Beer was initially sold by the keg. A bottling plant was later added on the building's north side. Stables occupied much of the property because horses delivered beer, according to a brewery history written by David Hagberg.

"It's been a huge privilege to work on this project," said Hulse, whose construction trailer has a vintage thermometer. "It's perfect weather for American Beer."

By the end of September, exterior work should be complete. Occupancy is expected by early spring. The structure was the life's work of John F. Wiessner, a brewer born in Uhlfeld, Bavaria, in 1831. Highly successful - he named his beer Superlative - he hired architect-builder Charles Stoll to create his temple of malt and hops.

When completed, Wiessner added his own touch - a metal statue of Gambrinus, the patron saint of brewing. For decades, the bearded and merry Gambrinus toasted all who passed the 1700 block of Gay St. The patron of beer now rests at the Maryland Historical Society.

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