

A downtown icon can be rejuvenated

By Mike Freimuth

Renewing Old Town Hall

There is perhaps no more iconic a building in Stamford than Old Town Hall. Unique in design, loaded with personal stories and local history, the building has been quietly sleeping for more than 20 years at the intersection of Main and Atlantic. While exterior renovation has been under way for a few years, simply improving the appearances is not sufficient for such a grand building. It needs to be made alive, reawakened and made operational in an entirely new world in which buildings need to meet higher standards for safety and accessibility as well as greater demands to serve daily business needs, whether governmental or for profit.

Over the last year, a mayoral steering committee has been at work assessing the structure, the cost to rehabilitate and restore its historic richness, the economic marketplace and the realities of government funding. From this effort, a redevelopment agency has been created, dedicated to just this building and given the mission to secure the financing, balance the public space with the needs of potential tenants, and manage the building once it has been completed.

Quickly, the committee realized the building has numerous physical shortcomings, limiting its reuse. For instance, it does not meet fire, public assembly, building or handicap accessibility codes. It has limited electrical service, rudimentary air handling systems and no cyber connectivity. Besides the need to modernize, the roof leaked, the basement floor had collapsed and deterioration was setting in among asbestos and lead. No easy task.

An elevator, new stairwells, public rest rooms and handicap ramps are necessary to deal with many of the code issues, without which the building could not open. Installing these features into the existing interior would create a series of design challenges, not least of them, the destruction of historic architectural features and a disruption of environmental hazards. A much simpler, cost-effective and operationally efficient solution was to put a

small addition onto the building to house these required systems.

This is where the fun begins.

Fuller and D'Angelo, the architectural team chosen because of its talent in historic rehabilitation, was instructed to create a program to prepare the building for its new role and function in the 21st century. To help ensure this goal, the murals and grand staircase would have to be preserved and showcased; historical details would have to be protected and, where necessary, recreated; the walls and stonework would need reinforcement; and the original style and grace would have to be honored.

Special attention would have to be paid to the functionality of the small adjoining park. There would also need to be some mundane planning tasks, like orienting the building to the Bell Street municipal parking garage. All of this had to be done while adhering to the context of state and federal historic preservation rules. Finally and most critically, the addition had to speak to the future while honoring the architecture of the past. The materials needed to express newness, transparency and openness. It had to be special, inviting the public in.

The least intrusive path was to modify the one side of the building that is neither limestone nor historically or architecturally important. In fact, this small portion of the building was at one time covered by two other adjoining structures that created a dark alleyway. More recently (for more than 30 years), this wall was covered with stucco. Already compromised, this side of the building afforded the architectural team the opportunity to design a small addition that would meet all of the building's needs without affecting or covering any of the historic limestone elevations.

Along Bank Street, the proposed addition embraces the limestone Beaux Arts style of the building's Main and Atlantic street facades. In doing so, the design keeps the addition compatible in size, mass and style with the existing building without trying to duplicate the original design. In fact, it picks up architectural style elements of buildings that once stood on the present park site but are no

more than photographic memories today.

As it turns the corner, a transparent glass wall feature, which can only be seen from the park side, guides the eye from the Bank Street wall to the Main Street front. This glass "sail" reflects the nautical elements found in other parts of the building, including a wave action hidden within the stair rails. More critically, it allows the outside pedestrian a view into the building and experience the grandeur of the great stairs at any time of day or night, while inviting the visitor within the building to view out to the city, ultimately all the way to the Mill River. In effect, it brings the cityscape into the great rooms of Old Town Hall.

Several design options and facade treatments were investigated by Fuller and D'Angelo, including some very traditional solutions. However, it was the "sail," itself a tribute to the seafaring nature of Stamford's early life, that captured the imagination of the mayoral steering committee and its successor, the Old Town Hall Redevelopment Agency, and was unanimously chosen by these committees as the best and most exciting solution.

Yes, the addition is different and controversial. But as you assess the history of the building and the neighborhood within which it stands, it is quite smart. It rejuvenates the structure and wakes it and the public up. A routine or conventional solution would not be fair to such a strong building. It needs to beckon.

Within the next few weeks, a model and other background information will be on display in the lobby of Stamford Government Center, itself a room enclosed by a large glass window onto the city. Citizens are encouraged to visit and comment. The input will be considered by the agency prior to authorizing the next phase of design work.

Like all art, there is going to be a diversity of opinion. But then again, what better way is there to discuss a government building other than causing a little debate?

Mike Freimuth is the city's director of economic development and serves as staff to the Old Town Hall Redevelopment Agency.