



RECLAIMING a Community

The Renovation and Restoration of Odd Fellows Hall — Southwest Detroit

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Throughout the past several years, a noticeable resurgence has been occurring in downtown Detroit. Events such as the Super Bowl and All Star Game, which are attended and watched by people all over the world, have breathed new life into the city. Slowly but consistently, Detroit is moving away from only being recognized as the automotive capital of the world. Various groups and organizations have been ambitiously working to erase the negative images of Detroit from long ago. Their mission is to make the city a vibrant, safe and exciting place to spend quality time.

Just as much as downtown Detroit is experiencing revitalization, so to are the surrounding communities within the city, including Southwest Detroit. It is also a goal to gradually bring each of the outlying areas of Detroit back to life, as well. One of the first steps to the revitalization of Southwest Detroit was the renovation and historical restoration of the 15,000-square-foot Odd Fellows Hall on the corner of Vernor and Lawndale. Under the ownership of the Southwest Detroit Business Association (SDBA), design auspices of Elisabeth Knibbe, AIA, principal, QUINN EVANS | ARCHITECTS, Ann Arbor, and construction management of The Monahan Company, Eastpointe, the building was slated to be completed in June 2006.



“THE NEIGHBORHOOD THAT BUILT THE CAR”

Southwest Detroit is one of the city’s most culturally and ethnically diverse communities, with a large Latino and Arabic population. A major reason for this cultural diversity was the booming automotive industry in Detroit. “We like to say that Southwest Detroit is the neighborhood that built the car because we had three General Motors assembly plants, as well as the Ford Rouge Plant, at the end of Vernor Avenue just across the Dearborn borderline,” said Kathleen Hahn Wendler, president, Southwest Detroit Business Association. “So, everyone in this neighborhood worked in the plants, and with that came housing developments to house people coming from all over the world to work.” It was always a close-knit, blue-collar community with the automotive industry supporting entire families. Businesses such as department stores, jewelry stores, butcher shops, and several other “Mom and Pop” stores opened to serve the neighborhood. “People never went downtown or anywhere else for anything because they didn’t have to, they had everything right here,” said Wendler.

Unfortunately, as the automotive industry experienced hardships over the years, so did the community that was built around it.

The project gave SDBA the opportunity to uncover all of the original windows at Odd Fellows Hall. All of the second floor windows around the ballroom are arched-framed with Pewabic tile surrounds.

“When I started working with the SDBA in the early to mid-1990s, the majority of the storefronts were gated and locked,” said Knibbe. “They would only open during the daytime. It just presented a really unwelcome and unsafe picture of the neighborhood. A lot of the buildings were also completely empty and severely blighted. Our goal was to help the community turn itself around and make it strong again.”

ODD FELLOWS HALL

The renovation and restoration of Odd Fellows Hall is vital to the overall SDBA effort for several reasons. The building sits on a highly traversed intersection through the neighborhood and is very prominently located directly on the corner. In fact, the entire area along West Vernor Avenue is on the National Register of Historic Places. Additionally, the location of the property at Vernor and Lawndale essentially borders Dearborn further west down Vernor Avenue. This allows Odd Fellows Hall to act as an anchor between the two cities. “We would like to establish a cultural incubator there,” said Wendler. “The Southwest Detroit side is predominantly Latino while the south end of Dearborn is predominantly Middle Eastern. So, we want to reinforce this area as a cultural destination and promote cultural tourism. The Odd Fellows Hall will serve as an anchor for this incentive and a connector between Dearborn and Detroit. This project definitely puts us on the right path to take full advantage of the cultural richness in this area.”

Another main reason for the project is to restore the tradition and history of the Odd

Fellows group, itself. Odd Fellows Hall was built in 1917 by the fraternal group of the same name established in England during the 17th Century. According to Larry W. Ladomer, president, L.W. Ladomer & Company, LLC (owner’s representative), “There are a couple of stories as to how they got the name of Odd Fellows. One is that they were a mixture of odd craftsmen who did not have a single trade group. The other story is that they were all very intent on giving aid to widows, senior citizens and those in need. At that time, the people in England thought it was quite odd that this group was helping out others. Somewhere in between there, the name Odd Fellows evolved. They eventually came to the United States in the 1800s.” The building was built with two stories in front and three stories in back. The entire second floor in the front housed a spacious ballroom where various community events and dances were held.

Even though the group has declined in numbers, their mission has always been to aid and assist people as an organization. SDBA plans to continue that tradition by not only keeping the name of Odd Fellows Hall, but also maintaining the same mission. The renovated space will house both retail and local nonprofit, community-service organizations. “I think that it is really fitting that the SDBA was able to gain hold of this building because they intend to use it for the betterment of the community,” said Ladomer. “So, it’s essentially the same mission as the original Odd Fellows fraternity centuries ago. It’s a continuation of tradition and a very unique situation.”



The tiles below the first floor windows follow the same color and pattern as the Pewabic tile within the arched-framed second floor windows.



The second floor ballroom was completely restored to its original appearance, including the brass necklace ceiling lights and replicated wood floor.

UNCOVERING A NEIGHBORHOOD TREASURE

The genesis of the Odd Fellows Hall renovation project was a "MainStreet" program designated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation National MainStreet Center in 1993. At the time, Southwest Detroit was one of three areas in the country to receive the MainStreet program, which also included a real estate development component. Normally, the MainStreet program is designated to smaller towns to spruce up and revitalize the area. However, when bestowed upon an urban community, it is also given a real estate component clause to promote commercial development.

After the Odd Fellows fraternity eventually sold the building, the new owner had neglected responsibilities and it eventually deteriorated. During the Mainstreet program, Odd Fellows Hall was scheduled for demolition by the City of Detroit after it had taken over ownership of the property. "The neighborhood was really concerned about the building because it was open to trespassers and had just become a real blighted influence on the community," said Wendler. "The Southwest Detroit Business Association approached the City and request that it not be demolished. We told them that we would take ownership, board it up and make it safe until we could redevelop it in some way. Fortunately, they said yes."

After a while, the SDBA began working with Elisabeth Knibbe to devise a plan to not only save the property, but also bring the historical Odd Fellows Hall back to life. The first step in the process was to venture into

the unknown of the interior and gauge the existing conditions. Once they were able to actually see inside, they realized that this once beautiful historical building was truly on the verge of irreversible deterioration. After discarding waste and even pumping out thousands of gallons of water from the basement, they were able to make several determinations. "The first thing we do when we work on a historical building like this one is that we look for what is around that is still salvageable and decide to keep it," said Knibbe. "Then we look for opportunities that we have to update the building to fit modern needs because you cannot always be completely nostalgic."

One of the most challenge aspects of historically restoring the building was dealing with the actual structure. "The whole back half did not have a roof over it for a very long time," said Knibbe. "As a result, one side of the exterior was severely bowing outward and almost ready to cave. We figured that it was caused by a rusting steel structure. So, we brought in a structural engineer and devised a plan to solve the problem. Our conclusion was basically that we needed to completely take down that part of the building and reconstruct it." In addition, they discovered the interior was designed and constructed similarly to how buildings in the early 1900s were built. The original design called for long wood spans that had shown signs of decay. "They had done some aggressive wood spanning in the original structure," said Knibbe. "We had to decide if the wood was really solid enough to reuse,

which some of it clearly was not. We obviously could not check every single joist, so we had to make some evaluations as to what was and was not usable in order to figure out how much we had to replace. Our structural engineer had some real challenges because construction back in the old days was done very piecemeal, which is not how we do things today. We could not custom fit every joist to fit into the existing steel, so we ended up modifying the steel in order to accommodate a modern structural framing system."

Although the structure posed some initial difficulties, the entire team realized that renovating and restoring the hall was crucial to the revitalization of the entire community. Once the boards were off of the exterior walls and the storefront windows were exposed, they discovered beautiful arched-framed windows with Pewabic tile surrounds. In fact, the original designers realized the significance of transparency to the community because they surrounded each floor with windows. The goal of Knibbe and her design team was to restore and re-open every window in their exact location. "The storefront was pretty much bricked up," said Knibbe. "We tore all of that out and returned it back to the big storefront idea with big display windows so that the interior of the building would be visible to the sidewalk." In terms of the interior, one of the saving graces for the entire project was the second floor ballroom/multi-purpose space facing the corner of Vernor and Lawndale. All of the arched windows and even the original wood floor of the ballroom was restored and replicated to its original appearance. Also, when they pulled down the old dropped ceiling in the ballroom, they surprisingly discovered somewhat of a simple hidden treasure: a 12' diameter set of brass flowered necklace lights that were used to illuminate the ballroom. At press time, they were in the process of cleaning and restoring the lights to reinstall in the ceiling as both an aesthetic and functional feature of the space.

"When we finally got the building reframed, I went into the building and realized, yes, it was definitely worth it to persevere and continue with the project," said Knibbe. "Before that, there was a definite point when we all were struggling with the whole idea. We had a structure with the wall removed and the building was basically hanging out there in the harsh weather elements. We all questioned why we were even going through with it. Well, when it finally started to come together with stable floors and stairways and we saw the wonderful ballroom with the beautiful windows, we saw that everything was worth it. We were able to really start visualizing the activities



The Monahan Company had to essentially rebuild the entire structural frame and exterior of the back half of Odd Fellows Hall.

that would take place in the renovated space. It became apparent that the renovated Odd Fellows Hall will become a great resource for this community, and they are much better with it than without it."

HISTORICAL RENOVATION WITH A MODERN SPIN

The Monahan Company began construction on Odd Fellows Hall in September 2005. One of the first issues was during the interior demolition phase. "We started off with figuring out a plan of action in terms of approaching the building due to its poor condition," said Thomas A. Prister, project manager/superintendent, The Monahan Company. "We had to carefully plan out how to perform the demolition in a safe manner. As we went forward, we uncovered those additional issues with the structural steel and framing. When we exposed the frame with the demolition, we found that you could actually push the structural columns with your hand and move them. There were no anchor bolts within the base plates of the steel and most of it was severely corroded. So a lot of shoring had to be put in place. We then had to integrate the new steel with the shoring, which also provided a significant challenge. We basically rebuilt the shell of the original building, while trying to prevent it from falling down in the meantime."

Once the team pumped all of the water out of the basement, they encountered undersized footings for the steel columns. Essentially, due to the poor soil conditions, the original building did not have a basement floor. "We had to make the structural steel changes, but by doing so, we changed the load characteristics and found out that the pads that supported the columns (which, in turn, support the entire building), were undersized," said Ladomer. "We had to go in the huge mud mess and reinforce all of the pads by enlarging them to support the weight with the given soil conditions." Added Knibbe, "The problem was that the soil had been soaked for so long that the load bearing capacity was not as it was when the building was originally built. We basically doubled the size of every footing."

As with any historical restoration project, most of the efforts during the design and construction process were focused on maintaining the original appearance with some adjustments for modern day facilities. However, the one concession that the team made to truly update the building to today's standards was the integration of the state-of-the-art geothermal heating and cooling system. Normally, this type of system is installed within a newly constructed facility. It was quite a unique situation to essentially fit such a technologically advanced HVAC system within an almost 90-year-old building. The

entire system is located below ground of the adjacent parking lot. "There were some interesting things that happened while we were drilling the geothermal field and some of the wells for it," said Prister. "It's five feet below ground, but each of the 42 wells for it are drilled 182 feet below ground. We have approximately 42 tons of cooling capacity for the building. We encountered unforeseen subgrade conditions during our drilling operations. There were fairly large caverns and voids in the ground, which made installing our wells quite challenging. We did obtain geological information from the local salt mine, as well as the State of Michigan."

Another issue that the team encountered during the drilling process was an existing basement below ground. At some point, a building stood on what is now the parking lot for Odd Fellows Hall. When it was removed, all of the waste building material was simply collapsed into the basement, covered and forgotten. "We could not just push our pipes through the basement because we would risk damage to the equipment from the waste material," said Prister. "So, we removed at least 350 yards of old building material from the site and brought in sand to fill it. We basically rebuilt the ground to house our geothermal system. We did not plan on doing that because it was an unknown existing condition."

Despite all of the initial challenges and unforeseen conditions, construction on the project has remained on schedule. According to Ladomer, "Our goal was to complete this project with a fast track method. We did it even with all of the problems that we encountered. We probably lost about six weeks from the original planned schedule because of the changes to the structural steel, but we are still very close to our initially slated completion date. I think that is a great accomplishment by the entire team."

A TRADITION LIVES ON

The renovation of Odd Fellows Hall is just one step in the revitalization of the entire community, but it gives residents hope. A once blighted and severely deteriorating building has been completely restored to its original grandeur. The tradition and mission of the original Odd Fellows Hall continues under the direction of the Southwest Detroit Business Association. "People cannot go past it without saying, 'Wow, when did we have this in our neighborhood?'" said Wendler. "It's just such a beautiful building to have back in our vibrant, culturally rich community. It will remain Odd Fellows Hall and we will maintain the tradition of helping those in need. If we put a new building in place of this, it just would not be the same. It would not be anything close to what we will have with this renovation project." ☺



The rendering of the renovated Odd Fellows Hall depicts an open and inviting building along a bustling intersection in a revitalized Detroit community.