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Sanborn Building owners seek originality during rebuilding process

Owners strive to revive structure with its traditional features

By **JOE GAMM**
The Daily Astorian

New and old combine as the Sanborn Building in downtown Astoria rises from the ashes after it was gutted by fire last Thanksgiving night.

And as the new building nears completion, one of its owners has announced that its anchoring tenant, Bank of America, will not be returning.

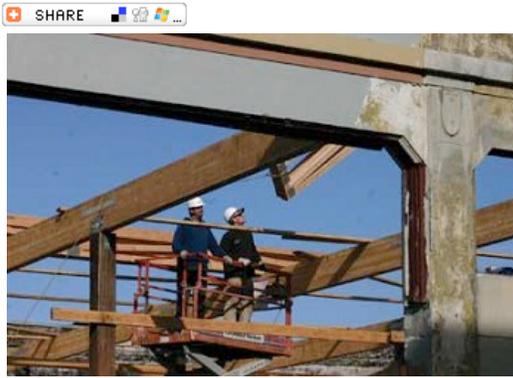
A partner in ownership of the building, Mitch Mitchum, said he is negotiating with several potential tenants, but Bank of America isn't one of them.

"The bank is not going back in," he said Monday.

Officials at the bank say they have not made any decisions on whether the bank would return to the Sanborn Building.

Immediately after the fire, the bank moved to a temporary site in a trailer on Duane Street. Six months later it moved again, to another temporary site at 595 Marine Drive that had been home to Lum's Auto Center's used car lot, where it remains.

Floors and four walls, broken only by gaping holes where picture windows once stood, were all that remained of the bank's former site at 977 Commercial St. after the fatal fire killed Astoria native Roger Martin and destroyed five businesses.



JOE GAMM — The Daily Astorian
Shaun Klein, left, and Jered Hix wait high atop a scissor lift for roof trusses to be lowered to them in the Sanborn Building. The new trusses were laid across new beams, which replaced beams that were scorched in the fire that nearly destroyed the building on Thanksgiving.



JOE GAMM — The Daily Astorian
Co-owner Mitch Mitchum observes the progress on repairs to the Sanborn Building. The structure was gutted by fire last year.

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A plugged-in hot plate fed by an extension cord has been blamed for the fire on the corner of Commercial and 10th streets in downtown Astoria.

The hot plate was inside the recently-closed Astoria Florist store, where the fire started and where Martin was living. Martin had been asleep when the fire broke out.

Fire stations from around the area responded to the inferno, but the fire could not be stopped.

The building was owned by Mitchum and Rose Marie Paavola of Luottamus Partners LLC for a little over a year. They vowed to rebuild.

But before reconstruction could begin, debris from the fire had to be removed from the wooden floor at the street level. Machines had to be brought in to haul the debris out. With estimates that the debris weighed more than 1 million pounds, for safety the first step was to reinforce the floor so it would hold the weight of the machines.

And the clean-up was under way.

Meanwhile the building's owners decided to bring in historic architecture experts to help them return the building to its vintage 1920s style. Mitchum and Paavola are veterans at reconditioning old Astoria buildings - they own three together and seven total.

They hired Ecola Architects and local architectural historian John Goodenberger to research the building's history.

The building, stretching from 965 to 977 Commercial St., was built in 1923, a year after the great fire that consumed more than 30 blocks of downtown Astoria. It was built on the site where The Daily Astorian offices and a livery stable had stood.

It was designed to be a jewel of modern times and in his research, Goodenberger found it was designed for the benefit of one tenant - the upscale Bee Hive Department Store.

"Before the Depression, there was a lot of money in Astoria - a lot of money," Mitchum said.

Recessed store fronts facing Commercial Street allowed shoppers to see products through the picture windows without having to stand in the rain. But Bee Hive was there for only a few years.

Over the years dozens of businesses and offices occupied different segments of the store.

As time passed changes were made to the building. The transom windows on the second floor were covered over. The retail spaces were expanded into the covered area that faced Commercial Street.

Mitchum said a lot of folks remembered the large panel facades that hung on the second floor of the building over its corner business, Bank of America.

"People thought that was because of the bank," Mitchum said. "It wasn't actually the bank. In the '60s and '70s there was a push to modernize - to not look old. They were added then."

Luottamus Partners gave Ecola Architects one instruction: "Make it as close to the original as you can."

To do so, designers found archived photos of the old structure.

They had Bergerson Cedar Windows Inc., from Hammond, try to salvage the components from the old windows. The tight-grained Douglas fir window parts that were damaged too much to be re-milled were used to make into smaller parts for windows.





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Ray Bergerson, whose father owns the company, said the company used historic photos to reproduce the original look of the windows. Though the windows look the same, some of the transom windows (those above the street level) in the original building could be opened on a pivot. All the new windows are stationary.

And the insulated double-pane glass wasn't available 85 years ago.

"I think they're going back - trying to make a useable, energy-efficient building - yet still have that historic exterior," Bergerson said.

Where the hardwood floors are intact, the building's owners intend to restore them to as close to their original state as possible, though they'll have a distressed look. In parts of the building where sections of the floor were seriously damaged by the fire workers salvaged the surviving wood to use in the rest of the building.

Beams that supported the roof had to be removed because they were too badly damaged to be salvaged. Numerous columns that sit below street level had to be fortified with steel and concrete. The original style of the building with the inset storefronts returns. The covered area will have a slate-like floor.

Reconstruction is estimated to reach beyond \$1 million. Mitchum said insurance will cover 80 percent of the costs. Fire suppression systems and earthquake-proofing the building have added to the building's expense.

The building will consist of five two-story-tall retail spaces and one gallery/studio space.

The entire process is expected to be completed in late September.

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