



Dynamo House rising / Video

A museum and hotel begin to take shape in the shell of a plant where steam turbines once spun out the newfangled luxury of electricity.

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Steel columns are going up in the turbine hall of the old South Street power plant, where in portions, the 80-foot ceiling height will remain. The Providence Journal / Andrew Dickerman

PROVIDENCE — Conversion of the former South Street Station power plant into a museum and hotel is on schedule and moving from demolition work to construction, according to a spokesman for the developers.

The plant, operated by Narragansett Electric for almost a century, is three adjoining buildings: the turbine hall, where steam-powered turbines generated electricity, and the 200- and 400-pound houses, where steam was generated at those pressures to turn the turbines. While demolition continues in other parts of the complex, crews have begun erecting steel in the turbine hall.

“As you might imagine, the building was designed as a power plant, so it wasn’t designed for human occupancy,” said Seth Handy, development director for Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse, the company doing the \$150-million conversion, which will be called Dynamo House. “So there’s quite a bit of change that needs to happen in the building to make it suited for people.”



Parts of the turbine hall, with 80-foot ceilings, will be left open at their original dimensions, Handy said. “Particularly in the museum lobby, which is a great showcase for the building, we’re retaining the height from floor to ceiling. It’s going to be a remarkably dramatic space,” he said. “With the open windows you start to get the cathedral feeling that the building’s going to have. These windows are just so stunning and big.”

Other parts of the turbine hall will have three floors: permanent Heritage Harbor Museum exhibits on the first floor, traveling Smithsonian exhibits on the second and commercial space on the third, which will have 43-foot ceilings. Handy said the developers are talking to potential tenants who may want to use the third floor for an auditorium or cinema.

The 400-pound house, in the front of the complex, will host the lobby for the hotel, which will bear the Starwood Aloft brand. “It’s going to be a spectacular hotel,” Handy said. “It’s going to run right along the roof of the building, so it’s going to provide views that are really unmatched in the city.”

In addition to the museum, hotel and commercial space, the building will have a restaurant, although the developers have not reached an agreement with a restaurateur yet. When

construction is done, which is scheduled for November 2009, the building will have 300,000 square feet of floor space.

THE CONVERSION of the 96-year-old complex was made possible, in part, through tax credits the developers received for reusing a historical building.

“Both the federal credit and the state credit are dramatically important to this project,” said Handy. “It certainly would not be able to happen without them.”

But developers are struggling to plug a \$5-million hole in their budget that was left when the state, wrestling with its own budget problems, changed the historic tax credit program. Credits were reduced, and processing fees that developers have to pay to get the credits were increased.

“Changing the program in midstream has hurt the project significantly,” said Handy. “We’re trying to figure out how we can account for it.” He said the developers are talking with the hotel investors and the museum to see whether they can help cover the shortfall or reduce the cost of their parts of the project.

“We don’t have a definitive solution to what we’re going to do,” said Handy. “We have a bunch of options that we’re working hard on right now.”

One of those options is to eliminate what had been designed as the signature feature of the project: six smokestacks that would tower 128 feet above the building’s roof. At night, the stacks would be illuminated with periodically changing colors that could be seen throughout the city.

“We very much hope that we won’t have to cut them out, but it’s one of the things on the table,” said Handy. “They’re expensive, and they’re absolutely not essential to the way the building functions.”