

Destined for Demolition

By Rebecca Crosby

How does a building in an historic district get creamed? Easy. Just make sure it has no historic value. Actually, it wasn't all that easy and the road to disappearing and transforming into a gleaming new office building is still being paved.

The next time you're driving down Blake Street take a last look at 1755 and see if you are even going to miss it. It's a tiny two-story structure that is next to a large, black parking lot and close to 18th Street, or block 021. This particular block of Blake Street is about 80% surface parking lots so 1755 was already a prime suspect for development when this new office project was first proposed early this year to the Lower Downtown Design Review Board.

First Century Development envisioned a 5-story office building with ground-floor retail beginning at the side wall of 1725 Blake, a handsome 3-story historic structure, and reaching to the corner at 18th Street. During the developer's presentation to the Lower Downtown Design Review Board's (LDDRB) meeting on June 1st, the project was really a temperature-taking venture. The real trick for this project involved taking down a structure that was designated as "contributing" versus a "non-contributing" building. When the historic district in LoDo was formed, a distinction was made between the two with the contributing category protected from demolition or significant alteration, except under extreme circumstances.

How would the design board take to the idea of demolishing a contributing building at all? Was it conceivable, or ever possible? It had never happened before. The history of the building was scant, with no known historic photographs of the structure and the original date of construction could not be identified through city records. What they did know was that 1755 had a sketchy past, whatever that means, and it has been sitting vacant for great lengths of time during the past decades. In the early 1980's it was renovated with over 50% of the building being replaced, leaving little evidence of any original or historic elements or charm to speak of.

The LDDRB wasn't convinced. During discussions they revealed they would still most likely not approve a demolition permit for 1755 Blake Street, thinking out loud that even though the building wasn't attractive or of an apparent historic nature, some thought its very existence, with its suspect past and its recent remake, still made it a part of LoDo's history.

However, while the LDDRB gave the developer no encouragement, they recognized all the dead space on this block with all the blank spaces created by parking lots, and suggested that a new, more fully developed design be presented, possibly even saving the building and working around it and or under it. They even suggested that a front that looked like many different styles of buildings, like a new-old-new progression might make a more interesting solution than just a long, one-style building front that seems to go on forever or at least 1/2 a block, particularly in LoDo's more pedestrian friendly and scaled sites.

Seemingly not discouraged, the developer promised to return. And, they did.

On August 3rd, First Century Development made a new presentation and this time with more ammunition. It was discovered that in 1930 the structure had undergone major remodeling that removed and rebuilt the entire front half. Again in the 1950s and the 1980s even more of the original building was replaced, leaving only some of the exterior walls in the rear of the building. They also discovered that an engineering analysis determined that some of the only remaining exterior walls were in danger of collapse if any excavation was to occur close to the current foundation. With this information, the board changed their tune. They agreed that demolition for this building was appropriate and voted to approve it, with the contingency of their final approval of the replacement structure.

Other professionals connected to the proposed new office building include the following: The marketing is by Grubb & Ellis, the general contractor is Haselden Construction, and the architect is RNL Design. Preliminary plans call for a completion by 2008 and will include two and a half levels of underground parking.

Next step will be First Century Development's design for a new structure, hopefully approved by the LDDR, and soon 24,000 feet of blank space on Blake Street will have a significant addition to this amazing and vibrant neighborhood we all call LoDo.