Hotel Syracuse in Limbo

By Michael Stanton

After more than 70 years of continuous operation, the Hotel Syracuse closed its doors in May of this year. There are no plans to reopen.

Just a few months ago there seemed a good chance that the aging and bankrupt hotel would be undergoing a $90 million restoration right now to serve as the official hotel of the Onondaga Convention Center, one block away.

The City of Syracuse had put together an ambitious plan to extricate the hotel from the control of the bank that now holds it. Title would have been transferred to Historic Restoration Incorporated (HRI) of New Orleans, one of the nation’s premiere hotel restoration companies.

The Hotel Syracuse would have emerged from restoration as a 4-star, Hilton hotel. All that was needed was for Onondaga County to designate the restored hotel as their official convention center hotel.

But the County had other plans. The selection committee for the convention center hotel recommended that the county build a new hotel, costing county taxpay- ers $20 million that would not have been required for the Hotel Syracuse.

When the County rejected the City’s restoration proposal, the bank controlling the hotel decided to retain ownership. At this point there are no announced prospects for restoration.

Another Chance for the Gustav Stickley House?

By Samuel Gruber

Once again, the future of the Gustav Stickley House at 438 Columbus Avenue is in question.

This is at least the third time in recent years that the historic house — widely considered to be the birthplace of the “Craftsman Home,” a central aspect of the American Arts and Crafts Movement — has been at risk.

In the late 1970s the house was listed for demolition. In 1996, the house was on the verge of begin stripped of its historic features. Now, the house needs extensive repair work, and even more important, a conscientious owner and a viable use.

Today, the house is owned by Alfred and Aminy Audi, owners of L. & J.G. Stickley Inc. the furniture company founded by one of Gustav Stickley’s brothers. The Audis purchased the property in 1996, stepping in to save the property at a price that far exceeded the means of the Arts & Crafts Society.

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County wants a new hotel

When the county put out a request for proposals for a new convention center hotel, it offered to help the chosen developer in only two ways.

First, the site for the new hotel, across the street from the OnCenter, would be provided free. Sec-
Hotel Syracuse in Limbo

(Continued from page 1)

ond, the new hotel would be given the status of "official" convention center hotel so the developer could be sure that convention business would be funneled there.

Of the proposals the county received, only one agreed to move forward with just those two incentives: the HRI restoration proposal for the Hotel Syracuse. In fact, HRI told the county it didn't need one of the incentives: the hotel site. The city of Syracuse had already agreed to donate the Hotel Syracuse to HRI for $1 if the company would agree to fully restore it.

Developers proposing to build a new hotel said thanks for the free site, but they didn't really need designation as the official convention center hotel. Because it would be just across the street, attached by a sky bridge, the new hotel builders already had de facto official hotel status.

$20 million please

But there was one thing new hotel developers did need that the county hadn't offered - a $20 million investment. "Look," they said, "why don't you loan us $20 million, then when the hotel opens and starts paying taxes, you can use these new taxes to pay off our loan."

And this may not be the end of the giveaways. One of the new hotel developers is also asking for a portion of the revenue from the existing convention center garage.

The selection committee's willingness to invest $20 million of our tax dollars in construction of a new hotel is even more baffling strong outside the Syracuse city limits (62%/23%) as it was within (62%/18%).

The Hotel Syracuse was favored by a majority of Republicans (54%/30%), Independents (63%/20%) and Democrats (65%/16%).

Why did the selection committee ignore the most cost-effective and popular option, the Hotel Syracuse? Here are some of their reasons:

Reason 1: The Hotel Syracuse is too far from the OnCenter.

HRI provided the design for a skybridge that would connect the Hotel Syracuse with the convention center one block away. There is already an underground walkway between the two buildings. Still, the selection committee complains the distance is too great.

In fact, most convention centers in North America do not have an on-site hotel. A good example is the Jacob Javits Center in New York City, host to some of the nation's largest conventions, where the closest hotel is six blocks away. Montreal's convention center has no attached hotel but thousands of hotel rooms within walking distance through the city's underground walkway system.

And sometimes "attached" hotels aren't as close as you'd think. Conference attendees walking from the huge Las Vegas Convention Center to its attached Hilton...
Hotel pass two-thirds of the distance through a “skybridge” without a single window; the remainder is in the open air. The total distance from hotel to conference center is double that from the Hotel Syracuse to the OnCenter.

**Reason 2: The Hotel Syracuse already has been remodeled — twice.**

Syracuse has never seen a restoration of the kind HRI proposed, not on this scale at least. In essence they would be building a new hotel within an old one. Every inch of wiring and plumbing would be replaced, a completely new heating and cooling system would be installed, elevators would look the same from the inside but all lift mechanisms would be replaced.

The emergency stairwell running all the way to the 10th floor ballroom would be enlarged and an additional stairwell added to bring the building up to modern code. There would be all new equipment in the kitchens and laundry rooms, and every guest room and bathroom would be reconfigured to the size and proportion required of a four-star hotel.

All the while, HRI would be preserving and restoring the parts of the Hotel Syracuse that make it irreplaceable: the chandeliers, the plaster work and elaborate moldings. In the end we would have the best of both worlds: all the conveniences of a modern hotel with the beauty and charm of an historic landmark.

**Reason 3: The HRI plan is too expensive.**

True, the cost of remodeling the Hotel Syracuse is higher than the bids for a new hotel. But the Hotel Syracuse project will cost the taxpayer less - remember, no $20 million investment required. This is money that would be flowing into our community, not out of our pockets.

How is this possible? Part of the reason is federal Historic Preservation Tax Credits for up to 20% of restoration costs, unavailable for construction of a new hotel.

And by the way, a restoration project like this is labor-intensive, creating more than 1,000 full-time jobs for two years.

**Reason 4: Conventions won’t book until the Hotel Syracuse restoration is complete.**

Selection committee members have said this is the primary reason they didn’t choose the Hotel Syracuse. The county, they say, can start booking conventions for a new hotel as soon as construction begins, but they can’t book conventions for the Hotel Syracuse until the restoration project is complete. This hasn’t been the experience with other large-scale hotel restoration projects, but let’s assume for the moment that it is true.

The Hotel Syracuse has been a fixture in our community since 1924; properly restored, it could serve generations yet to come. The convention center has lacked a competent hotel partner since it opened in the 1992. Should the number of bookings during the months when the hotel is under construction/renovation be the primary deciding factor for which hotel is chosen? Is there any possibility this difference in revenue could equal the $20 million taxpayers are being asked to invest in a new hotel?

HRI’s latest large-scale hotel project is the 916-room Renaissance Grand Hotel in St. Louis. It is the official hotel of the America’s Center, a convention center roughly three times the size of our Oncenter. Half of this hotel is new construction; the other half is the restored 1917 Statler Hotel.
designed by the same architectural firm that designed the Hotel Syracuse: George Post and Sons.

Dennis Wagner, manager of the Renaissance St. Louis, has some experience booking conventions and working with restored historic hotels. I told him our convention center personnel expect it will be easier to book events for an unfinished new hotel than an unfinished hotel restoration. He didn't buy it. "It will be hard either way," he said. The worst nightmare of any convention planner, he said, booking an event more than a year in advance, is that they will get a call a few months before the convention saying the facility won't be ready in time.

Wagner predicts we'd find convention planners reluctant to make a commitment before the official hotel opens, regardless of whether the hotel is new or restored.

With the drop in international and domestic travel since 9/11, the St. Louis Renaissance has been struggling to meet occupancy projections. I asked Wagner if he had any regrets about making the historic Statler hotel part of the project. "Not at all," he said. "When people walk into the lobby for the first time, they are just stunned." He said the Crystal Ballroom, very similar to the Grand Ballroom at the Hotel Syracuse, is booked solid for banquets and receptions. J.W. Marriott, president of the Marriott chain, includes the St. Louis Renaissance among the five most beautiful facilities in his world-wide chain of over 100 hotels. Wagner said the Renaissance has been a catalyst, sparking development of restaurants and shops all around the hotel. "This hotel," he said, "is the best thing to happen to downtown St. Louis in years."

PACNY Still Working to Save Hotel Syracuse

PACNY continues to push, both publicly and behind the scenes, for a long-term solution for the Hotel Syracuse.

In April, PACNY Vice President Beth Crawford and Communication Director Mike Stanton met with Onondaga County Executive Nicholas Pirro. The County Executive promised in that meeting to include the Hotel Syracuse in the County’s deliberations for a new convention center hotel.

PACNY also met with Dale Sweetland, president of the County Legislature and a supporter of restoring the Hotel Syracuse as the convention center hotel.

Development Director Bart Feinberg to discuss the HRI restoration proposal.

This summer PACNY spearheaded a petition campaign for restoration of the Hotel Syracuse.

On June 5th, PACNY joined with the Syracuse New York Building and Construction Trades Council to sponsor a rally for the Hotel Syracuse in Columbus Circle. More than 100 supporters turned out for the event, including State Representative Joan Christiansen and Syracuse Common Councilor Stephanie Miner. The Rally was well covered by the local electronic and print media.
By Elizabeth Crawford and Cynthia Carrington Carter

Michael Heagerty is continuing a family tradition in Eastwood.

Heagerty is the third generation to operate the 1924 neighborhood movie house, the Palace Theater, built by his grandfather Alfred DiBella, a master carpenter and real estate investor. The theater has been run for the past 45 years by Heagerty’s aunt, Frances DiBella, until her passing this past Spring.

Heagerty is also a builder; his company designs and builds restaurant interiors. He has described this renovation as a labor of love.

The Palace Theater, a favorite among Syracusans who prefer grand old theaters to the mega-mall movies, is getting a well-deserved face-lift. The 1,200-seat theater is being renovated inside and out. When it reopens later this Fall, it will be a state-of-the-art facility.

The 80-year-old theater has been renovated a number of times in the past, and as Heagerty and his crew remove old ceilings and wall finishes, remnants of his grandfather’s original work are being exposed, including the original marquee. The marquee is being restored, and the vertical Palace sign, so long a bright visual presence on James Street, is being replicated. Wende and Ted Kuzia of Neon Glassworks are creating an exact replica of the vertical sign, which will hang over the marquee.

Heagerty has decided to cut back the number of seats in the front and rear of the theater to create a more spacious entry and room for a small orchestra up front. The interior work includes repainting, new carpeting, improved heating and ventilating, renovated restrooms, and the re-opening of the balcony, which has been closed for years. Comfortable upholstered furniture will make the balcony a wonderful addition to the theater.

Plans for the renovation also include a new coffee shop next door in what used to be a barbershop. The café will serve coffee, pastries, and sandwiches and will provide theater-goers with an opportunity to get a bite to eat before a show.

Heagerty plans to make the theater available for more community events, receptions, and birthday parties. But one thing Heagerty promises he won’t change is the $3.50 admission ticket. Look forward to the Palace Theater’s reopening in October.
or other public groups who had championed the house’s preservation.

At the time, the Post-Standard reported that the house would be turned into a museum. Aminy Audi was quoted: “We are delighted to know that the Gustav Stickley house has been saved and the community can breathe a sigh of relief.” Audi also said, “It will be kept intact so it can be enjoyed for future generations here and throughout the country.” In a separate article she stated “It is in many ways our gift to the community. We believe this historically important house belongs in Syracuse,” [P-S, Jan. 16, 1996].


**Maintenance required**

Unfortunately, for reasons not known, expectations for the house have not been met, and the Audis are now reported to want to give the house to a not-for-profit group without ever having achieved their goal. Though apparently used for occasional photo shoots, the house has not received the attention the Audis promised and has never been open to the public or been part of any programming by local neighborhood or arts group. Recently, in part due to the last harsh winter, it has noticeably deteriorated and may need tens of thousands of dollars of basic repair work.

Nonetheless, the Audi offer to give the house to the public provides new opportunities for the long-term preservation and public use of the Gustav Stickley House. Freed of the obligation to raise a quarter-million dollars to purchase the building, a new owner can focus on seeking money for maintenance and public programming. A public entity might also be eligible for some new sources of funding. If the Audis would undertake the necessary repairs to the building before donating it, this will be made much easier. If they do not, it is essential the property be transferred to a responsible, if only temporary owner, and some urgent repairs undertaken before the coming winter. Already the wet summer has accelerated the building’s deterioration.

Presumably, the Audis either deducted the original purchase as a business expense or they will take a tax deduction for the full value of the house after they donate it. Considering their earlier promises to the public, the Audis should make every effort to ensure that public stewardship of the property will succeed. Even so, since there are few local not-for-profit groups that have the money or organization to carry out this effort, it might be best that a larger institution, such as Syracuse University or the Everson Museum, take over the house. They could then establish an arrangement with an organization such as the Arts & Craft Society to manage it.

The condition of the house was brought to public attention last April, when Charles Tremper and Donald Seibert, Columbus Avenue residents who have lovingly restored their own house (featured on the Westcott Neighborhood Historic House Tour in 2002) wrote to the (Continued on page 7)
Post-Standard about recent damage to the Stickley House.

“Last spring, broken storm windows appeared in the first-floor bay window. During the course of the recent severe winter, a front corner became encased in ice, leaving cracked and peeling paint, dampness and presumably rot behind as the ice melted. So far nothing has been done to slow the damage” [P-S, April 2, 2004]. Tremper and Seibert ended their letter with the comment “There has been much talk lately about retaining and attracting young creative people. It is monuments such as this house that give the area its sense of character and place and make it an attractive place to live.”

Certainly, good use of the Stickley House, and the nearby former Jewish War Veterans’ Post at the corner of Westcott and East Genesee, have long been viewed as important projects for improving the northern area of the Westcott neighborhood. Despite promises by their owners, both projects have languished for many years.

Organizations interested in the fate of the Stickley house will be meeting in August and September in an attempt to find a workable solution.

A Brief History of the Gustav Stickley House

Gustav Stickley lived at 438 Columbus Avenue from 1900 to 1905 and from 1915 until his death in 1942.

In 1901, following a fire, Stickley redesigned the interior of the house, putting many of his design ideas into effect. After Stickley’s death, the house changed owners. In 1955 the city granted a variance to allow five apartments in the former Stickley house. By 1977 the house was boarded up and targeted for demolition. Appraised at $5,000, it was purchased by area landlord Norm Roth, who reportedly invested $100,000 to rehabilitate the building for use as apartments. The house was included on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983.

In 1994 Roth sold the house to New Hampshire building restorer Larry Foy and Syracuse antiques dealer David Rudd (Rudd specializes in Arts and Crafts furniture). The partners hoped to preserve the landmark building, but couldn’t put together the financial backing. In 1996 Foy claimed they had invested about $125,000 in the house, on top of the $165,000 purchase price, but couldn't keep up with the mortgage payments. They decided to sell and, if a buyer couldn't be found, they planned to sell the interior in pieces.

The Arts and Crafts Society of Central New York, which honors Stickley and his creations, tried to raise funds to buy an option on the property, but fell short. Meanwhile, original Stickley furnishings had become highly sought-after commodities by the likes of Barbra Streisand, Steven Spielberg, and Richard Gere. One of the Stickley house owners said he had offers to buy parts of the Columbus Avenue interior for twice his asking price for the whole house.

It was at this point that the Audis came to the rescue, reportedly paying $225,000 for the house and its built-in furnishings.

2004-2005 Program Schedule

Preservation Association of Central New York

November 21 — “What Syracuse Can learn from Italian Cities.” Everson Museum, 1:30 pm. Sam Gruber, having just returned from a year in Italy, will discuss how reusing older buildings is an effective part of urban planning in that country. Free for members, $5 for all others.

February — “Freedom Trail Signage Project.” Learn more about this important PACNY sponsored project.

May — “Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum: recreation, education and ecology in a living historic landscape.” This presentation will address the master plan for the Onondaga Botanical Garden and Arboretum (encompassing Onondaga Park, the Onondaga Creek Parkway, Kirk Park and, by extension, Elmwood Park), re-knitting urban fabric by telling new stories in historic landscapes.
VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT

Preservation Association of Central New York

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Syracuse, NY 13203

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Fax: 315-474-2347
Email: PACNY@USADataNet.net

Since 1974, PACNY has been Central New York's strongest advocate for preservation and reuse of our architectural heritage.

PACNY has led efforts to save historic resources throughout the region including Hanover Square, Armory Square, Hawley-Green, Sedgwick, and the Landmark Theater — all have been threatened with destruction.

Become a member of PACNY today — help us preserve the irreplaceable.

Renew Your PACNY Membership Today

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