

# Historic tower gets update

## \$40m renovation to turn Ames Building into boutique hotel

By Thomas C. Palmer Jr., Globe Staff | July 6, 2007

The Ames Building, a towering 14 stories at 1 Court St., reigned for more than a decade as the city's tallest skyscraper -- but that was more than a century ago.

Empty for the last eight years, a nonstarter for two would-be redevelopers, and more recently isolated by ugly concrete barriers, the exquisitely carved, historic landmark is soon to be reborn as a boutique hotel with a fine restaurant.

Designed in a combination of Byzantine and Romanesque styles by architects tutored by H.H. Richardson of Trinity Church fame, the building is undergoing \$40-million-plus renovation to ready it for readmission to downtown's active urban life .

"The Ames Building is one of those structures that are flower-like, and it will be more and more appreciated as the years roll on," one writer predicted in a pamphlet in 1891, soon after "the

most prominent and eligibly situated of Boston's great buildings" opened.

Its 21st-century redevelopers, who bought the property in April for \$17.7 million, said they intend to make that statement true again.

Home of the Old Colony Trust Co. and its great impenetrable vaults, the Ames Building was built by Frederick L. Ames, a member of a family prominent in Massachusetts and American business and politics. It remains one of the tallest masonry buildings on the East Coast, built around a steel-beam skeleton that in its time was the latest in building technology.

"We will recognize that historic element," said Justin D. Krebs, a principal of Normandy Real Estate Partners, part of a team that bought the building. For the time being, the property is being called "Ames Hotel"; the Ames name will be retained, he said.

Cambridge Seven Architects has been laying out the plan for 125 luxury rooms -- four-star level, ranging in quality between Nine Zero Hotel on Tremont Street and the super-luxury XV Beacon Hotel -- and a first-floor martini bar and restaurant on the adjacent Washington Street Mall.

"We've had strong interest from some of the best restaurant groups out there," said Krebs. Club entrepreneur Seth Greenberg is advising the developers.

"Personally, I'd like to develop a Mistral-level

restaurant," said Greenberg, referring to the elite restaurant he runs in the South End. "Something beautiful that really maintains the integrity of the architecture."

Formerly an office building, with marble floors and mahogany and leather doors, the Ames has a unique exterior, with an intricately carved and varied façade of granite, sandstone, and blue slate, cornices, corbels, and carved-in-stone human heads, entrelac patterns and acanthus leaves -- all of which will be preserved.

"You can't do much -- you're not allowed to," said David T. Welsh, a Normandy founder.

Inside, though, almost everything will change. Normandy and partners are searching for a prominent Boston or New York interior design firm to make the interiors as remarkable as the respected exterior created by the original architects, Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge. They also are still deciding on a name, hotel brand -- independent or part of a chain -- and operator.

"We've had discussions with a lot of major flags," said Krebs.

Both Intercontinental Real Estate Corp. of Boston (not related to the new InterContinental Boston Hotel) and O'Callaghan Hotels of Dublin previously owned the Ames Building and took runs at bringing it back to life. But it's situated on a tight site, with no parking, little loading space, and scarcely room for

much conference space.

Since then, the hotel market in Boston has improved considerably, and the new developers have come up with different uses for the lower floors that are expected to bring more revenue.

Normandy and partners said they have made the small, 7,700-square-foot plot work by being inclusive; that is, by opening it to the outside. Instead of having conference space, they are expanding the areas devoted to restaurants, which is designed to accommodate more people -- not only hotel guests but also passersby.

"We want to bring it into the street scape, into the mall and the neighborhood," said Krebs.

The first floor will house a lobby, facing the Washington Street Mall, as well as a fine-dining restaurant that will look out on the mall, State and Washington streets, and the Old State House.

Lunch and breakfast spots will be located on the second floor, accessed by a grand staircase and a restored mosaic arch.

Normandy is based in New Jersey and has more than 7 million square feet of real estate -- half of which was recently acquired and in New England. It is codeveloping Ames with British real estate developer Richard Kilstock, who redeveloped residences in London's Savoy Hotel. A third partner is Eamon O'Marah, who is working on a hotel in Providence

and who won permits for the Ames previously, when he worked for Intercontinental.

The hotel is scheduled to open in fall 2008. Tishman Construction Corp. of New York is the general contractor for the renovation, with Walsh Co. LLC of Morristown, N.J., overseeing the project for its owners.

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