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City gas plant given new life ENERGY FOR AN EARLIER ERA WORK CONTRIBUTES TO REVITALIZED NEIGHBORHOOD

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BY RICHARD AMRHINE

It could have been demolished and replaced with a gleaming new structure, but instead the former city gas plant is finding new life as the handsome home for two local businesses.

Located at Charles and Frederick streets in an area of town that has experienced something of a rebirth itself in recent years, the 1906 building will house Wack Construction Co., which headed the rehabilitation project, and Impressions of Fredericksburg, an interior design firm currently located at 214 William St.

"This [city] is our home, so we were willing to do some special things," said Steve King, a partner in Wack Construction. "It was a gamble, and it was a long process."

He said the company knew that saving and reconfiguring the building would be more difficult than building new, but that the effort was worth it.

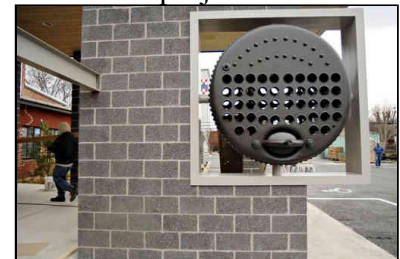
Collaborating with Richmond architect Robert Steele and project superintendent Tobias Jenni made a difficult project run as smoothly as it could, King said.

Lynn Hamm co-owns Impressions with his daughter, Kelly Banez, and the 9-year old business has outgrown its present location. They expect to open at their new quarters on Feb. 1.

"This is going to be the perfect place for us, the lighting, the ambience. It's actually design-friendly the way it's set up, and it will be attractive to clients," said Hamm, adding gleefully: "We'll have 10 parking spaces."



The former city gas plant gets a new entrance as part of the renovation project.



From inside the former gas plant, another reclaimed neighborhood building can be seen.

Receiving multiple large-truck deliveries each day will be much easier than it is on William Street, he said.

The gas plant project was delayed until last March, when a Virginia Railway Express parking lot lease expired. King said once the two companies determine how much space for parking they need, the rest could be leased back for commuter parking.

Tax credit project

It is what's old, of course, that makes the building unique. Working under the constraints of the federal Historic Tax Credit program, which King said made the restoration possible, and with the city's Architectural Review Board, the commitment to retain the true character of the building was never in doubt.

"The tax credits are a wonderful program, and really made this possible. Without them the building would have been torn down," he said.

The brick walls, which remain exposed inside and out, were repaired and repointed where necessary. Here and there a brick labeled "Lee Savage" protrudes above a doorway, recalling what King believes was the Richmond firm that supplied the original bricks for the building. Many of those did have to be replaced.

"I counted it up and we used 40 tons of material, brick, sand, mortar, just to save the building itself," King said. "That doesn't include everything that's new in here."

The riveted steel roof truss system is a work of turn-of-the-century art, but the roof it supports is new--tongue-and-groove boards on the inside, and a standing seam metal roof outside.

To meet the tax credit guidelines, the new second floor is a "floating" design, King explained, that is supported by heavy steel crossbeams but connected only where necessary directly to the walls. Also according to the rules, interior openings are as they were originally in nearly every case, and the multiple original windows and window walls were preserved and provide ample natural light.

Wack Construction has owned the building for about five years, King said, and intended all along to expand there. The building provides about 6,000 square feet in its present configuration, and the company will use about two-thirds of that--a welcome change from its cramped 1,400-square-foot headquarters at Mill Race Commons.

Interior features were designed to intrude as little as possible on the original appearance. Suspended cylindrical ducts carry warmed or cooled air throughout the building. A radiant heat system was built into the first floor. Stairs and balconies are left open so as not to obstruct views.

Outside the cleaned up building looks much as it must have a century ago. A new covered entrance way supported by polished block columns lends a contemporary but complementary look to the building.

Incorporated with the entrance is a medallion that consists of the two ends of one of the plant's original boilers. King said iron artist John Jewell created the medallion using a special torch to cut through the body of the tank. He then welded the two ends together.

"Then we had to cut the rest of the boiler apart just to get it out of the building," said King.

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