

525 Main St. architect: “It is an honor for us to do that building”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Northside December 18, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about Northside* 

“There is a misunderstanding about what we are trying to do,” says one of the owners of 525 Main St. Gadfly followers will indeed know that the owners are controversial figures because of their Airbnb use for their several homes in the Historical District. See [Airbnb](#) on the sidebar.

Selections from Dave Howell, “Bringing back the spirit.” Bethlehem Press, December 16, 2020.

One of downtown Bethlehem’s most imposing buildings is being remade at 525 Main St. with extensive renovations that include a new elevator. After being delayed due to the COVID crisis, work should be completed by the end of the year.

The first floor will be retail. One new store will be occupied by ArtsQuest, and another by Domaci, a furniture and decor provider. Both are expected to open by the end of November. There will also be nine B&B

units included in the five floors, called Lofts on Main.



The upper exterior will remain the same, with its fancy, green-trimmed cupolas jutting from the roof. On the side of the building you can see the faded letters “Steinway Pianos Huff Music,” a reminder of the store that used to be on the second floor.

“The building has greatly changed over the course of history,” said architect Fred Bonsall in a phone conversation. The exterior is being redone in a historic fashion.

“The new facade harkens back to the Victorian period of the original building,” says Bonsall, a principal at Serfass Construction. “It is quaint, not overly ornate, but not modern.”

Because of its significance, Bonsall said last month at a meeting of Bethlehem’s Historic and Architectural Review Board, “It is an honor for us to do that building.”

Husband and wife Jay Brew and Mary Ellen Williams bought the property two years ago.

“We like to collect old houses and redo them,” Brew said at his Bethlehem home on Market Street. “We try to bring back the spirit of the houses. The Main Street building was tired and not fully utilized.”

The couple have retained the original maple and pine floors, decorative window glass, many of the light fixtures, and all of the original doors. Brew estimates that the cost of the renovations will be about a million and a half dollars.

525 Main was originally known as the Myers Building.

“In 1892 George H. Myers, director of the Bethlehem Iron Company, the First National Bank, and the Lehigh Valley Railroad, built this building, then the largest building in the Lehigh Valley,” according to the willis-g-hale.tumblr.com website. “Five stories high and built of Milford pink granite, it was designed by Philadelphia architect Willis G. Hale, whose flamboyant, highly ornate style was popular in the 1880s and 1890s.”

“Myers built the most modern building in downtown Bethlehem.” Brew said. “There were fireplaces on every floor, but no sign that they were ever used. A number of them were closed off. They were built just as steam heating was coming in.”

“There is a misunderstanding about what we are trying to do,” said Brew, who wants to disassociate himself from Airbnb landlords who do not screen renters. The couple say they are careful about customers.

“We have turned away hundreds of thousands of dollars in business from clients we were unsure about,” Williams said. They use the online Airbnb rental marketplace.

“We want to keep these properties at the highest level,” Blue said. “We are working to preserve these houses and preserve the green space.”

Profits from their B&Bs are donated to ArtsQuest. The retail space will be ArtsQuest's first occupancy on the north side of Bethlehem. It had a precursor with a merchandise tent in front of the Main Street building during this year's Musikfest. The new store will offer merchandise that was formerly in the first floor gift shop at SteelStacks on Bethlehem's Southside, which was recently removed to accommodate a new bar, restaurant and performance space.

"This will give us a chance to be directly involved with our business partners of the Northside," Lunger added. "We have wanted to be a more active participant. By having a year round presence, we can participate in events like the Harvest Festival and the Mother's Day Fine Art and Craft Show."

The new location represents ArtsQuest's resilience in overcoming its revenue losses due to the COVID crisis.

photo credit Bethlehem Press

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