

Two historic downtown high-rises becoming one

By: Garrett Andrews

At nine or 10 stories – depending how you count the original mezzanine – the Woodlark Building was one of Portland’s early skyscrapers. When its ribbon was cut in 1912, the Sunday Oregonian declared it “one of the most modern and complete buildings of its kind.”

Next door is the equally illustrious Cornelius Hotel, which, over its 108-year life has served as an upscale hotel, a gay bathhouse and a fire-scarred vacant building.

Now, workers are fusing the two historical properties into a 150-room hotel for the ownership trio of Arthur Mutal, NBP Capital and Provenance Hotels.

“They want a nice hotel that also respects the unique history of the buildings,” said architect Christian Robert, principal at R&A Architecture, one of the architects employed for the project.

Owners kicked around a number of ideas for the past couple years, including various combinations of office, multifamily and hotel. They also purchased the nearby Sullivan Building and other adjoining parcels.

Robert said the design team had to “fight for every inch” to update the buildings and still abide by preservation guidelines. Certain materials and building technologies considered out of touch with the original historical era – including exposed brick in the lobby – were nixed in design development. To maximize space, the team created unique mezzanine and junior suites that employ the historic ceiling heights.

The project will have two restaurants – one for formal dining and a smaller tavern in the Cornelius building’s northern portion, the original entry lobby of the hotel.

Design-wise, there are a lot of cooks in the kitchen. Firms are under contract for room design and the design of the ground-level bar area that wasn’t included when the project went through permitting. And after the first construction permits were obtained (which took more than a year), R&A took over construction administration from the project’s initial architect, MCA Architects.

MCA has stayed on as architect of record.

“These are very old buildings,” MCA partner Dan Gates said. “There’s a million things about this project. It’s very complicated.”

Combining two buildings that have non-aligning floors is no easy task.

“None of the floors actually match up, so we solved it by providing a different stair length at each level,” Robert said.

Another major task is bringing Woodlark and Cornelius up to seismic code. The Woodlark is a concrete building. The Cornelius has some steel columns in the center, but is basically a wood-framed building with exterior walls made of unreinforced masonry (URM).

To achieve uniformity, the contractor, LCG Pence, is employing shotcrete with a fiberglass mesh to stabilize the URM from within. Other advantages include requiring less space to apply, and allowing the team to retain more of the historic URM.

In a way, tying two buildings together provides structural support, Robert said.

“It’s like you have two feet to stand on,” he said.

R&A project lead Richard Destin said it’s an honor to bring old artifacts back to life. And it’s exciting to work on a wood high-rise, he added, at a time when emerging mass timber products are de rigueur.

“Under current code, none of it would be allowed,” he said.

The Woodlark

Cost: \$30 million

Architect: R&A Architecture

Architect of record: MCA Architects

Contractor: LCG Pence

Expected completion: spring 2018