Architectural detective looks for the bare bones and fabric of Louisiana's Old State Capitol

By ANNE PRICE

A n architect's job involves a lot more than drawing neat schematic plans, and if you're Fred McNaughton and you're in charge of restoration of the Old State Capitol, it means painstaking detective work before the first definitive plan is drawn.

The turreted architectural landmark is entering a new phase of its existence as a part of the Louisiana State Museum, and McNaughton's research will in part determine just how it will be used in this new phase. The art group, headed by Joan Samuel, is being formed to work with the museum in guiding and assisting with operation of the building as a museum program.

McNaughton's research will involve not only the physical characteristics of the building, but its historical and present uses and the best use for its future as part of the Museum.

McNaughton himself has already turned up a lot of information, including the fact that the building really should be called the Old Capitol instead of the Old State Capitol.

"That's what it's called in the historic documents, in the original specifications," he said. "We have for too long called it what it was named when it was the Old State Capitol.

"We have begun a major effort to document the history of the building. The materials are historic, dating everything and determining the condition of all the materials in the structure," the New Orleans architect said in an interview here last week.

McNaughton and Associates will complete a master plan and a historic structures report by Aug. 1. "If all goes well, we will begin to develop architectural plans for the first phase of the work then," he said.

The U.S. Congress, involves money and he will also be working out a budget for the project which will determine what will be done first and what will be done with the funds available.

The Legislature has allocated $12.5 million in the current session so far, and the State Museum, which now administers and controls the building, will request an additional $1.5 million in this year's capital outlay budget.

He says he has no idea at this time what the total cost might be, and much depends on what he finds out in his investigations. A report prepared by Baton Rouge architect John Desmond several years ago estimated a cost of $1.5 million, and construction costs have spiraled upward since that time.

"We don't know at this time of only serious structural problems in the building," McNaughton said. "There are none readily apparent. The roof has been patched and reroofed in a sort of hodgepodge of repairs over the years.

"One of the chief problems of building occupants, and one which contributed to the closure of the Jay Broussard Memorial Art Gallery, is the condition of the roof. McNaughton's detective work will be painstaking, as he tries to determine exactly how the building was constructed and how it appeared originally in order to make the restoration as historically accurate as possible.

Building materials will be analyzed, dated for age and checked for condition. A computer analysis of the building will be made, inside and out. If you see someone scraping in the cracks of the building, don't be surprised. It will just be an effort to find a trace of original paint.

"We hope to determine the color used in the 1870 restoration by Will A. Frazier, McNaughton said. "I have little doubt that we'll find evidence on the building exterior. There are some exterior crevices and if possible learn what the colors were. As for the inside, I'm certain it was not the color it is now.

The physical research will involve all the building's features, architectural and structural. The plumbing, mechanical and electrical systems will be carefully charted and analyzed and there will be some probing into the existing fabric of the building to get a complete picture of the structure.

A photographic documentation of both the exterior and interior of the Capitol will be made, including all photographs of the site, and extensive measured drawings of the building will be completed. No such drawings now exist.

"They were apparently never made, said McNaughton. "We've already done research and are reasonably certain such drawings were never done.

McNaughton's master plan will provide information to help answer the question most important to Baton Rougeans: When is restoration complete? The architect says he has no idea what the report will indicate, this may be more than $1 million.

"We're trying to form any opinion at all until all the research is in," he said. "In the plan we are going to determine the goal of the Old State Capitol, but this will depend on how they would relate to the State Museum. It's pretty obvious some changes in occupancy will have to be made. These will be in accordance with a thorough and equitable way.

He said, however, that he felt the Broussard Gallery should be continued in some form.

"We certainly will be looking at that closely. It seems we should consider using that space for a collection," he said.

Townsend Wolfe of the Arkansas Art Center will be a consultant on the master plan, particularly with reference to the relationship of the building to the museum and cultural services.

This report will be of particular significance in determining what to recommend for the future operation of the building as a museum. Wolfe's role will be one of developing the goals of the Louisiana State Museum in the Baton Rouge community.

McNaughton says the function of the building will always be considered at every step in the restoration, and that determination of this function to the satisfaction of everyone involved is major goal of the surveys now being made.

"We will develop the relationship potential of the Old State Capitol to other cultural and museum facilities in the Baton Rouge area," he said. "To this end, questionnaires will be sent to some 30 institutions in the area to find out how they perceive the facility fitting into the state cultural scene.

McNaughton also wants to determine how the State Museum might provide services to other important state buildings, such as the Capitol and the Governor's Mansion, in the areas of maintenance and upkeep as well as through programs and exhibits.

"I sincerely hope that in the future we can assist in the preservation and maintenance of the new State Capitol," the architect said, noting that this building is also of significant architectural and historical importance and many of its artistic and architectural features require special expertise in maintaining. "It requires a person knowledgeable in preservation technology," he said.

"It may be that the museum can provide some of that technology," McNaughton said.

McNaughton issued an appeal to local residents who might have some information about the Old State Capitol to share their knowledge with him.

"I'd like to have a call go out to the public who might have any old photographs, negatives, or any significant knowledge of the building such as old clippings, mementoes, or any clues about the design and appearance of the original furniture," he said.

He noted sadly that the building has lost many original touches over the years, such as decorative details and original furniture, and that any clues to help determine how they look are badly needed.

Anyone who has such information is urged to contact McNaughton at his office in New Orleans by telephoning (504) 586-1870.

When will the actual physical work on the building begin? And when will it be completed?

First stage construction may begin in about a year. Completion and determination of the scope of the renovation, will deter- mine the starting date. McNaughton believes approval of the initial studies to make the restoration accurate and appropriate indicate solid state support of the project.

"We are fortunate to have this process approved by the state. The building is of such quality that it requires that kind of effort."