Elegance restored to once derelict LSU building

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By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

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James Francis Broussard, LSU’s dean of administration and head of the department of Romance languages in the 1930s, conceived the idea of the French House as a center for intensive study of the languages, literature and culture of France.

The late Ernest Gruempard wrote in the State-Times Dec. 29, 1977, "Prof. Broussard lived and breathed the French House project and it was as a result of his efforts that the legislature appropriated $75,000 for the building."

The architectural firm of Weiss, Dreyfous and Scarritt of New Orleans, the same firm that designed the Louisiana Capitol, designed the building located at the corner of Highland Road and South Campus Drive. The exterior was patterned after a manor house in Normandy, which Broussard had photographed on a trip to France.

The French ambassador to the U.S., Andre de Lhoye, laid the cornerstone April 5, 1935, as part of LSU’s Diamond Jubilee marking 75 years of progress. Placed in the cornerstone was a piece of wood from the foundation of the original Fort de la Boule, the first French fort established in Louisiana.

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He is indeed in sunny France," Dixoo wrote. French meals served from the modern Gueuls were served hors d'oeuvres, and the event as a grand occasion. The editor, described the event as a grand salon Louisiana heritage," Champagne was designed on the east bank. Also in the cornerstone Opelousas. The Grand Salon was at the center of the building, at the French House. "It had gorgeous French furniture," she said. for a guest to keep alive French culture. "Believe it or not, we sneaked the picture and had pieces remade," she said. "And we built another stairway at the French Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair." Brockway said, "but it was illegal as a fire hazard." They had refused to match the original, and it was too far gone to fix.

The beautiful marble mantel, which had come from a home in New Orleans, had been completely broken up, "It was gravel," Brockway said. "We could not even get a crane inside the building." Pat Brock told McCall that the final building was "not exactly the same, but it serves the purpose," Brockway said.

Brockway recalled the rededication ceremonies April 3, 1981. Sola Seifferl, the only original architect, attended. "He was a nice old gentleman," Brockway said. "He was having so much fun with the construction. He was very complimentary with what we had done with the building." Thomas de Clouet, ambassador to the United States and son of the building's designer, James de Clouet, attended the ceremonies for the cornerstone in 1935, was keynote speaker for the re-dedication.

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Dean apparently feels downtown may not be big enough for two major hotels, and he hopes to convince Argosy to drop out of the running.

"We're talking about a $15 million renovation that would bring back the Capitol House, but Bob wants a guarantee that someone else won't move in right on top of his project and take the market away," Scott said.

Campbell said Argosy has no problem with Dean buying the Capitol House, but suggested that project will have to live or die on its own merits.

"If Mr. Dean's project is dependent on Argosy abandoning its hotel, that's not going to occur as of this point," the company's lawyer said.

Argosy has been feverishly planning a hotel project to present to city-parish officials, perhaps within another four to six weeks. The hotel has been a point of contention between city hall and Argosy ever since the Belle of Baton Rouge opened.

As long as the hotel project doesn't go forward, Argosy must pay a financial penalty to the city-parish that amounts to an extra $2.50 fee for every patron that boards the Belle of Baton Rouge casino. Officials said the penalty is averaging $300,000 a month.

Mayor Tom Ed McHugh said late Friday that Dean hasn't talked to him about replacing Argosy's hotel project with a Capitol House renovation.

"I doubt very seriously that's going to happen," the mayor added. "I'm not sure we could legally do it. We're optimistic that Argosy is very close to a downtown hotel connected to the Centroplex and expanded convention facilities with walkways.

"I'd encourage Mr. Dean to build his hotel along with Argosy's hotel," McHugh said, adding that market studies he's seen indicate downtown Baton Rouge could use another 500-plus hotel rooms.

Scott said Dean has a grand vision of putting the Capitol House back to its splendor of the 1930s when it was Baton Rouge's pre-eminent hotel and was named the Heidelberg Hotel.

"We're collecting the history of the hotel from the Louisiana Historical Foundation and other sources and we're looking for anyone with interior photographs of the old Heidelberg's lobby and grand ballroom," Scott said. "We'd like to redo it in grand, old fashion with a European feel.

"We're thinking about 250 guest rooms, with ballrooms, a barber shop and other souvenir shops," he said. Scott suggested that Argosy Corp. might like the prospect of Dean spending $15 million to $20 million of his money to build a hotel a few blocks from their riverboat.

"They'd have a hotel within a mile of their boat without putting up any money," he said.

Dean's purchase option with Capitol House Preservation Co. expires May 30, records at the East Baton Rouge Parish Clerk of Court's Office show. His $100,000 deposit would go toward the purchase price if the deal is done.

Davis Rhorer, director of the Downtown Development District, said Friday he's thrilled with the prospect of turning the vacant Capitol House from an eyesore to a thriving property again.

"The Capitol House is such an icon in the city, and people would like to see it renovated," he said. "We'll certainly try to help Bob Dean, if he proceeds."

The proposed sale marks yet another change in direction for the property. Last year, the hotel's owners looked into a $15 million restoration concept that would have turned the hotel into a retirement community.

But those plans fizzled.

Dean is an accomplished developer who has brought other downtown properties back to life. His portfolio includes the Roumain, Belisle and State National Life buildings downtown; Lake Shore Place, an apartment complex near Interstate 110 and the Governor's Mansion; and the old City National Bank building, which Dean plans to turn into offices and a restaurant or banquet hall.

Dean also owns the Dean Tower, a 14-story office building outside downtown on Florida Boulevard.

Still, Campbell said, Argosy isn't about to abandon its own hotel planning, which has gone on for many months "with potential partners and potential lenders."

"We're not in a position to announce what will be done and when at this point, but the project has been on the front burner for a long time and it remains there," he said.

Campbell said no one with Argosy has met with Dean or is planning to meet with him at this point about the Capitol House plans. He said Argosy's hotel project "is virtually at the threshold now. We've gone way beyond just the vision stage. Coming up with a specific, concrete proposal is getting closer all the time."