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## Old Space to New Home

*The Staten Island Museum Goes 'Green' in 19th-Century Building at Snug Harbor*

By **KATHLEEN LUCADAMO**

The Staten Island Museum had long hoped for a new home to showcase its arts and sciences collection, a task made more difficult by its desire for an eco-friendly space rich in history. Naturalists eager to protect the Staten Island's bucolic past had founded the museum in 1881 and moving to a sleek high rise or demolishing an existing building wouldn't do.

"Not destroying the environment is part of our mission," said the museum's executive director, Elizabeth Egbert.

The Snug Harbor Culture Center was the ideal choice.



Joel Cairo for The Wall Street Journal  
The Staten Island Museum's new home under construction

Overlooking New York harbor and a short trip from the museum's current exhibit facility at Stuyvesant Place, the 83-acre Snug Harbor is the heart of the borough's cultural life. It houses the Staten Island Botanical Gardens as well as a children's museum, a contemporary art gallery and a maritime collection in stately 19th-century structures.

Snug Harbor dates back to 1801 when Capt. Robert Richard Randall's will called for the creation of a facility for "aged, decrepit and worn-out seamen," a place he called "Sailors Snug Harbor." His estate bought property in 1831, opening its first Greek-Revival building on the waterfront to 37 men a few years later. Its companion structures, including what is becoming the museum's new home, were added between 1841 and 1880.

Plus, the Staten Island Museum was among other groups that had fought to save Snug Harbor from demolition in 1965, forfeiting its city funding in exchange for two historic buildings on the site. The plan was to eventually move the museum into the buildings but the project stopped and started for decades amid cost overruns, economic downturns and red tape.

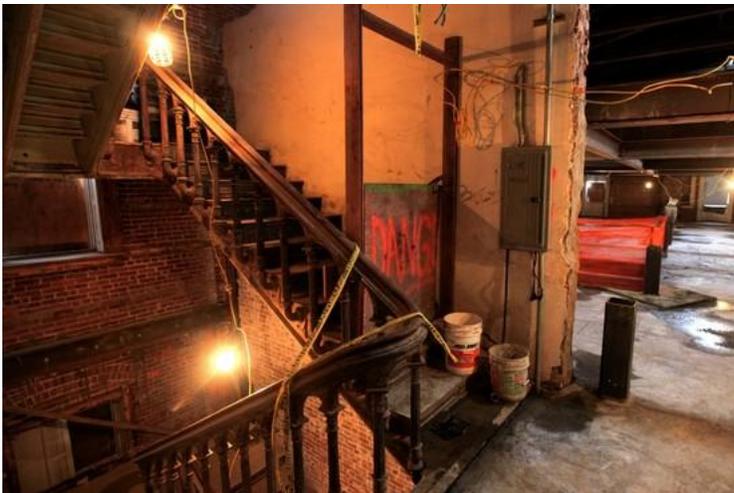


Collection of the Staten Island Museum

The building at far right behind trees in a row of Snug Harbor buildings facing the New York harbor

But in March 2011, construction began on redoing the interior of one of the Snug Harbor buildings with the promise of opening to the public in fall 2014. The work will preserve the building's exterior while making the structure the first "green" historic building in the borough. It will also be climate-controlled, making it easier for it to borrow art from museums around the world.

"There is an excitement that comes from bringing back to life a beautiful old facility," said Kate Levin, commissioner of the city's Department of Cultural Affairs.



Joel Cairo for The Wall Street Journal

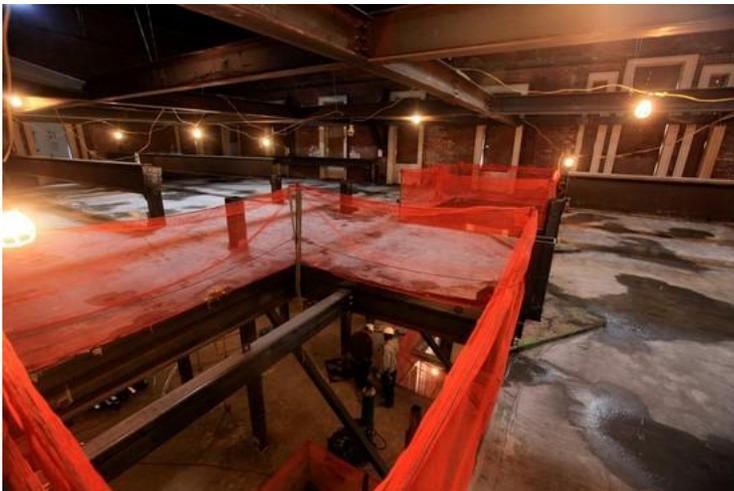
The staircase inside the building will be the only original structure left after the renovation.

The museum's Greek Revival building—one of five that form a row along the waterfront—will feature three floors of new exhibits, a 110-seat auditorium and a full-scale replica of a mastodon that once roamed the island.

The museum already stores its archives in Snug Harbor but the new 18,000-square-foot flagship space will allow it to display more of its two million treasures, which include the largest cicada collection in North America, a meteor and paintings by Hudson River School artists.

But transforming an old building into a state-of-the-art museum without destroying the integrity of the structure has proved a challenge

often faced by cultural institutions when they take over landmarks.



Joel Cairo for The Wall Street Journal

Work on the third floor.

"Everyone wants to save these historic structures but how do you make them sustainable is the question," said Ms. Egbert.

In this case, architects had to figure out a way to make the building energy efficient while controlling the climate to preserve the paintings and artifacts.

"When we came on board, the conditions in that building lent itself to the complete redesign of the interior," said project manager Robert White of Gluckman Mayner Architects in Manhattan, which specializes in readapting historic structures. "This was a more complex

project than others [we've worked on] because of the extent of reconstruction."

They added a geothermal system to heat and cool the building, which involved installing 32 vertical loops up to 500-feet underground to pump heat to and from the earth.

The building's wood interior structure was replaced with a steel one—much like replacing the bones of a skeleton. The heavy timber floors also had to go. While they were fine for a building housing a few dozen sailors, they weren't sturdy enough to hold up hundreds of visitors a day or to support heavy sculptures. But the new floors will be finished with salvaged timber from the building.

The most prominent reminder of the building's storied past is the original cast-iron staircase down the center of the space, which will serve as the museum's main public staircase. Historic windows and shutters will also remain, allowing museum staff to control natural sunlight in the art galleries.

Not much else of the inside fixtures or other relics remained because the interior was gutted in 1984 when the city gave the green light for an earlier reconstruction plan to create a new home for the museum. That project was shelved because of unforeseen costs and funding problems.

After that, the interior had lapsed into a dusty disaster with sheet metal over the windows, disused equipment in the cellar and raccoons who called it home, according to Andrew Wright, an architect with Manhattan's Tonetti Associates Architects who has consulting on the reconstruction since the 1990s.

"It was just a mess," he recalls. "At the same time, it was a really majestic building," he said.

Even so, the new home for the Staten Island Museum followed a bumpy road. After the failed attempt to revive the Snug Harbor building in the 1980s, museum executives explored erecting a new home in St. George, not far from its current Stuyvesant Place facility.

That idea never moved beyond the proposal stage, which has added to difficulties raising money for the latest push on the Snug Harbor space.

"When you have a history of saying you are going to jump in the water, then come to the edge of the well and don't jump in, it's hard to convince people otherwise," said Ms. Egbert.

Still, she persuaded the Department of Cultural Affairs, the City Council and Staten Island Borough President James Molinaro to fund the full \$26 million project, in part because officials believe it will revitalize the entire Snug Harbor area. Despite a large number of tourists who arrive in the borough on the Staten Island Ferry, the campus struggles to get tourists because many quickly return to Manhattan without exploring nearby attractions.

"There are so many great spaces at Snug Harbor. To unlock the possibility there seemed like a really appealing idea," said Commissioner Levin, noting the larger home will allow the Staten Island Museum to do more programming as well as reintroduce a city landmark at Snug Harbor to the public.

"The Staten Island Museum is dedicated to the history of the borough and putting it in a historic building reinforces that mission," she said.

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