

Plans on drawing board to modernize Fire Station No. 11 in Midtown

By Tom Bailey Jr. (Contact), Memphis Commercial Appeal
Tuesday, September 29, 2009

Newspaper accounts from 1941 reported that Fire Station No. 11, even then one of the city's oldest and smallest, would be torn down and rebuilt -- larger -- on the same site, 1826 Union, near McLean.

The next year a reporter covered the dedication of the new building, describing exterior white brick, tile lining the inside, neon lights "and every comfort for the firemen from air conditioning to bedroom facilities."

Now for a 2009 update: The Memphis Fire Department plans to renovate the venerable No. 11.

"They are designing that one now and planning to renovate that next year," said Lt. Wayne Cooke, spokesman for the Fire Department.



Jim Weber/The Commercial Appeal

Historic Fire Station No. 11 on Union Avenue. was built in the 1940s to replace an older single-bay structure. Memphis architect John Pruett has developed a niche in renovating older fire stations for the city.

The designer is Memphis architect John Pruett, who has built a portfolio of renovating fire stations.

The work is unlike most renovation projects.

"The first thing that comes to mind is people live there," said Pruett, who designed his first station renovation about five years ago.

"Other municipal buildings are empty at nighttime. These are occupied 24 hours, seven days a week. You have to work around them while they are there."

The Fire Department has recently changed its approach to renovating the stations. Instead of upgrading portions of the property, like the kitchen or heating and air conditioning, it is now making the renovations comprehensive.

"They decided it's a better use of money to take a fire station in need of renovation and analyze how you can bring it up to more modern standards and make it ADA (Americans With Disabilities Act) compliant, provide gender separation and just really spend the money

there instead of renovating a kitchen and four or five years later come back and have to repair the air conditioning," Pruett said. "Every time you do that, you have to undo some of the work you did a few years before."

The Fire Department has 56 fire stations and 1,664 fire suppression personnel, Cooke said. Of those, 148 are female firefighters.

The renovations include gender separation for sleeping quarters as well as restrooms and showers.



Jim Weber/The Commercial Appeal

Architect John Pruett is renovating historic Fire Station No. 11, where small doors still open onto its original fire poles.

"And we're making (the stations) more energy efficient, just trying to save the taxpayers money," Cooke said. "Putting in extra insulation, energy-efficient windows, upgrading mechanical and air-conditioning and heating systems, and replacing old ductwork."

Pruett embraces the additional challenge at Fire Station No. 11, to keep the old-style character while modernizing the systems.

"To keep the historic look, yet add modern amenities," he said.

He went to the station a few weeks ago to verify such measurements as ceiling heights and door widths.

Upstairs, Pruett pointed to the old swinging wood doors that lead to the pole firefighters slide down to quickly get to the fire trucks.

"That's the kind of stuff I want to keep," he said.

Firehouse renovations

Number: Since 2002, some renovation has been performed on 35 of the city's 56 fire stations

Nearing completion: Two major rehabs for Fire Stations No. 29 on Elvis Presley and No. 17 at Summer and National

Next up: Renovation on Station No. 26 in Frayser starts next month

Compare: \$6 million to build a new station; \$1.4 million to renovate an existing station

Change: Fire Department changed its approach two years ago. Instead of making small improvements to multiple stations, it's doing full rehabs to a few at a time.

Sources: pruettextarchitects.com and the Memphis Fire Department