

The Star-Ledger

REVIVING A PILLAR OF NEWARK

'Heartbreaking ruin' to become a grand gateway

Thursday, July 31, 2008

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Baye Adofo-Wilson wants to once again throw open the doors of the historic, once-majestic South Park Presbyterian Church.

And yes, he's aware there's nothing on the other side.

All that's left of the landmark limestone church is the facade, a "heartbreaking ruin," as city historian Charles Cummings once wrote, comparable in posture to the fire-blackened tower of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin, bombed in World War II.

But the Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District, which Adofo-Wilson heads, is spending \$4 million in grants to restore the facade of the structure and turn it into the gateway for the long-neglected neighborhood, now undergoing a revitalization.

Scaffolding has gone up around the church's portico, and workers must first stabilize the structure before beginning restoration, according to the project's architect, Alan Horwitz of RMJM Hillier. The cupolas that once topped the colonnaded towers will be rebuilt, which means the tree that has taken root in the roof will have to come down. The boarded-up windows may be replaced with stained glass similar to what had been installed in the church in its prime.

Plans call for an amphitheater and perhaps a garden on the other side of the facade, which is now an empty lot.

"Symbolically, it's representative of the city of Newark," Adofo-Wilson said. "It's a great structure that has a phenomenal location -- it's probably the most prominent structure you see from the southern end of Broad Street -- but it needs to be restored."

South Park Presbyterian, finished in 1855, was designed by John Welch, the architect behind the Gothic High Street Presbyterian Church (now the St. James A.M.E. Church on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard). The interior followed conventional church design, with a domed ceiling, columns with gilded capitals and a marble baptism fount, according Jeffrey Bennett, who runs the website NewarkHistory.com.

Its greatest claim to fame is that Abraham Lincoln stopped there and spoke on the steps of the church on his way to his first inauguration. After Lincoln's assassination, nearby South Park was renamed Lincoln Park, and the neighborhood became one of the most fashionable in town, home to many of the city's prominent industrialists, although the church itself was known for its progressive politics, not ritzy parishioners.

Over the years, the neighborhood deteriorated and the church's population dwindled. After the riots, the building was leased to the Pentecostal Lighthouse Temple, which used the building to feed the homeless until the late 1980s, when the structure was deemed unsound. A fire in 1992 gutted most of the building, and everything except the façade was leveled.

"I'm proud that Newark has such a beautiful building," Bennett said, "but on the other hand it makes me sad that it's just a ruin."

The church was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972. Though rundown and marred with scorch marks from the fire that consumed the rest of the building, the facade today looks much as it did when the church was still active, with an imposing portico supported by four columns and flanked by two bell

towers. Construction workers discovered that one bell remains, although the cupolas topping the towers were removed years ago.

"We're very fortunate that the facade has survived many of the changes that the city has gone through, and that it now has a chance at another life and to become a beacon for something new," said Bill Mikesell, the president of the Newark Preservation & Landmarks Committee, which raises money for, and awareness of, the city's architectural history.

"It's a very grand structure, even what's left of it, and we're lucky to have it, because it really does take us back to another time in American history."

The restoration is just one part of an ambitious redevelopment plan, 10 years in the making, to turn neglected Lincoln Park into a mixed-income arts and cultural district that mixes homes, shops, restaurants and nightlife. There are plans to build a museum dedicated to African-American music across the street from the church, and a couple of blocks to the west, Adofu-Wilson's organization held a ribbon-cutting recently on Lincoln Park Village, an environmentally friendly condo and townhouse development.

"We're going to take care of it," said Theresa Hooper Marshall, the chairwoman of the organization's board, about the church. "We're going to make Lincoln proud."

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