

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 30
Number 3 *The Russel Erskine Hotel*

Article 9

9-22-2004

The New Russel Erskine

Mike Holbrook

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly>



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Holbrook, Mike (2004) "The New Russel Erskine," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 30: No. 3, Article 9.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol30/iss3/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Historic Huntsville Quarterly by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

The New Russel Erskine

MIKE HOLBROOK

The proposed plan to rehabilitate the former Russel Erskine Hotel posed several challenges. A renovation to convert the hotel to apartments for the elderly undertaken in the early 1980s basically gutted the ground (basement) level, all but the lobby and ballroom on the main floor, and all of the hotel room configurations on the second through twelfth floors (the tower). The new owners' current plan is not to change the basic apartment use of the building, but to make the living units more functional, comfortable, and attractive while maintaining and restoring the remaining historic elements. Although the original building floor plan was extensively altered in the 1980s renovation, asbestos-containing material and lead-based paint are still present and must be remediated. A several-thousand-gallon fuel tank that supplied fuel to the old boilers also must be removed. Because the building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a significant Huntsville landmark, the owners want to do a certified historic rehabilitation.

The proposed renovation calls for an all-new heating, ventilation and cooling system, as well as new plumbing fixtures, lighting fixtures, and roof and fire protection (automatic sprinkler system). The historic exterior brick and stone will be restored by re-pointing the mortar and cleaning. The original wood and steel windows and the wooden storefronts will be restored and painted to match the original color. Inappropriate aluminum windows that were added in the '80s on the Spragins Street ground level will be replaced with a more fitting clad-wood window. New entry doors will be installed to match the original doors. Street-scaping will provide new sidewalks, trees, and period light poles consistent with the City of Huntsville's plan.

Because of the extensive cost to reconfigure the existing floor plan, the basic apartment floor plans, with the exception of the kitchens, will be retained from the 1980s renovation. The kitchen plans have been redesigned to be more functional, with

new cabinets that will accommodate new full-size appliances including the addition of a dishwasher. All new bath fixtures and mosaic floor tile will provide a hint of the “period look.” New gypsum board ceilings will be installed to replace the existing suspended lay-in ceilings in the apartment units to give the look of the original plaster ceilings that were removed in the ‘80s. Apartment entry doors and other doors in common areas will be replaced with a replica of the hotel’s original two-panel doors. The entire building will be fitted with new light fixtures and floor and wall finishes while maintaining the existing original terrazzo and ceramic tile floors. While all of this may seem simple and straightforward, this renovation is to be accomplished while the building is still occupied by the current residents. And, since the building is occupied, the current HVAC, plumbing, electrical, fire protection and alarm systems must remain functional while the new systems are brought on-line.



Front desk west elevation, 2004. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects



Mezzanine, 2004. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects

Before renovation can begin, abatement contractors must remove the asbestos-containing material, located mostly in pipe and water tank insulation in the boiler room. The building contains—as do most all buildings constructed before 1978—varying amounts of lead-based paint, most of which is intact and poses no health risk for residents. The lead-based paint will be encapsulated with new paint, and future workmen can appropriately deal with it according to the Operations and Maintenance Plan created by an environmental engineer. The renovation will begin on the twelfth floor and proceed downward. But in order to renovate any floor, the entire floor and the floor below it must be vacant for worker access. The owners have anticipated the renovation plans by maintaining a vacancy that will allow at least two floors at a time to be vacant as the work progresses on down. Once a tower floor is complete, residents will move in to allow access to the next floor below. All stair and corridor exit routes must be maintained open and accessible during the entire renovation.

Once work is complete in the tower, the main and ground floors will be vacant for the final work, which involves not only rehabilitation of the remaining living units but the restoration of the historic lobby and ballroom. Fortunately, these areas survived the previous renovation with few changes (most of which are easily reversible), such as the inappropriate doors and glass installed at the front desk and the ballroom entrance, and the off-the-shelf replacement light fixtures that are inappropriate for such a grand space. The original decorative finish on the classical plaster moldings was covered with a coat of paint that obscured the detail. The current rehabilitation calls for some of the decorative painting on the ornate plaster moldings to be restored, the front desk glass to be replaced with period appropriate glass, the ballroom doors

The new owners' current plan is not to change the basic apartment use of the building, but to make the living units more functional, comfortable, and attractive while maintaining and restoring the remaining historic elements.



Elevator with Greek key detail, 2004. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects

replaced with new doors replicated to match the original, and period-appropriate light fixtures installed. On the ground level, the plans call for a new community room that will provide space for crafts and games, a sitting room that will include a TV area and a library, and an exercise room that will offer residents a way to stay fit. One of the most exciting aspects of the rehabilitation is the addition of a caterer's kitchen and restrooms that will make it possible for the restored lobby and ballroom to be used for limited public functions.

Thanks to the vision of the new owners, the "New Russel Erskine" will provide very comfortable accommodations for its residents while remaining a Huntsville landmark for everyone to enjoy.



*Hotel lobby, 1950s, with placards of civic clubs,
trophy fish, and magazine rack. Courtesy
Huntsville-Madison County Public Library*

