BRINGING BACK BELL

THE $38 MILLION REDEVELOPMENT OF TREMÉ’S ANDREW J. BELL SCHOOL INTO AFFORDABLE ARTIST HOUSING AND WORK SPACE BY A UNIQUE DEVELOPER WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS IS A POWERFUL SYMBOL OF NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGES TO COME.

BY DANIELLE DEL SOL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES SHAW
HEY MAY NOT KNOW ITS NAME, but people know the imposing silhouette of the Andrew J. Bell Junior High School.

Driving on Interstate 10 through New Orleans, it’s hard to miss. The hulking Gothic brick and stone landmark commands attention, its repeating roofline crosses seemingly sanctifying the blue, black and white graffiti tags that mar the walls below. The building has sat empty for seven years now, with warped wood planks covering many of its windows and serpentine vines slithering through cracks in the mortar — yet, still, its Gothic grandeur endures. Those who do know the name Andrew J. Bell might remember its long-celebrated reputation as home to one of the best middle school marching bands in the city. Several members of the Grammy award-winning Rebirth Brass Band learned their skills from the school’s inspirational music instructors; the impact of teachers like Danny Barker and Donald Richardson on the lives of students in Tremé served, for decades, as a vital part of the storied and living history of the city’s oldest African-American neighborhood, one that has always been defined by cultural richness.

The Bell School began life in 1904 as the all-girls St. Joseph Academy High School and Sisters of St. Joseph Convent, designed by Owen and Diboll, architects. The sisters had occupied the site, bound by North Galvez Street, Ursulines Avenue, North Johnson and St. Philip streets for decades; still standing in front of the school building today is a Gothic chapel commissioned by the sisters in 1887 and designed by James Freret. The order moved to a new location in 1960 and sold the city block and all its buildings — today there are five — to the Orleans Parish School Board.

Though Bell Junior High, like the neighborhood surrounding it, fell into disrepair in the following decades, it was still a vibrant cultural and educational hub for the community until 2005. The school’s vacancy since Hurricane Katrina has been an abysmal addition to the neighborhood’s landscape — one pocked with blight, in an area lakeside of Claiborne Avenue that has long struggled with economic disinvestment. The school should have been repaired after the storm, said Joe Butler, local project manager for the nonprofit developer Artspace. Its abandonment, he said, “represents a real tragedy in terms of responsibility of the stewardship by the public sector.”

Drive by the school today and the structure, though languishing, seems impressively intact. Though in the midst of hurricane season, roofers had begun scheduled summer repairs in the weeks before Hurricane Katrina that included ripping the terra cotta tiles off the school’s roof. When the storm hit on August 29, only plywood and paper were left to shield the top floor’s classrooms and offices from the deluge. Over an inch of rain fell per hour throughout the day. Despite the steady streams saturating the walls, stripping the paint and scattering furniture, paper and supplies inside the school, the structure stood strong. Bell Junior High survived the storm, and Tremé was largely spared from major flooding. With its students and faculty displaced, though, the building sat empty. As other neighborhoods throughout the city began to rebuild and revitalize, the section of Tremé surrounding the school continued to decline, as did the Bell campus itself.

“The Bell School site in its entirety represented a cultural crossroads, a connector, and that story spanned from the 1870s” — when the sisters bought and first occupied the block — “until August 2005,” Butler said. “And then it just went dead — stone cold quiet. The building was not actually destroyed by the storm, but instead by the seven years of abject neglect that it faced while unoccupied.”
With the Recovery School District (which took control of the site from the Orleans Parish School Board after Katrina) having given up hope of ever reoccupying the school, the building’s costly repair and reuse seemed pie-in-the-sky. Residents wondered who would ever take on a restoration of this size, scope and level of complication.

The answer came in the form of a Minneapolis-based non-profit developer that unites the resources of city, neighborhood and philanthropic entities to make complex projects possible. Artspace creates, owns and operates affordable spaces for artists and their creative businesses across the country, and their projects usually involve the adaptive reuse of historic buildings. Their rehabilitation of the Bell School site — construction broke ground in October 2012 — is no exception. The school itself and adjacent buildings, including the former Ben Franklin Elementary School building fronting North Johnson Street — 148,000 square feet total across two whole city blocks — will be adapted by Artspace into a community art hub that will include 73 units of affordable live/work units for artists and their families, affordable offices and facilities for nonprofit organizations, on-site restoration opportunities and a permanent home for a fledgling architectural crafts guild, 45,000 square feet of community green space, open exhibit areas and more. Artspace is partnering with stakeholders locally and nationally to fund the $38 million project and to ensure its success and longevity within this historic neighborhood.

“This formerly gorgeous building is one of New Orleans’ gems, and we needed a building that was interesting enough, visible enough, important enough, sexy enough to convince both local and national investors from the philanthropic community that this was the site,” Butler said. “Plus, the Laffite Corridor, the new Wheatley School — there is $400 to $500 million in investment within six surrounding blocks. That helped [this project] write its own future — now the Andrew J. Bell School will be restored as a hub for culture in Tremé.”

As a NOT-FOR-PROFIT real estate developer, Artspace has an unusually altruistic claim: “As a mission-driven organization we have absolutely, positively no vested interest in putting our profit before any of the interests of our constituency,” who are artists and cultural workers, said Shawn McLearen, director of properties. Artspace exists to keep affordable spaces available in revitalizing areas for artists to live and work — units at the Bell School site will rent for prices affordable to those who make 30 to 60 percent of the average median income — and for arts-driven businesses and nonprofits to have offices. It’s a well-known phenomenon that artists seeking cheap, interesting spaces will often set up studios in disinvested areas and, by virtue of living there and reintroducing art and culture, make these neighborhoods hip. This makes the area more desirable to outsiders; real estate prices climb, the area begins to flourish economically and the artists are no longer able to afford rising rents.

Artspace was born three decades ago as “a person basically in a chair with a phone taking calls from artists trying to find a more affordable place to live when they were getting priced out of the apartments they were in,” said Bill Mague, vice president for asset management. The nonprofit arts organization’s board decided, after some time of essentially existing as a housing service connecting artists to landlords, to develop its own affordable housing and work spaces for artists. Today, Mague said, it has completed and operates 32 sites in 14 states and has another 15 projects in the pipeline. Their projects are usually mixed-use, combining affordable housing, studio space, community gathering areas and offices in one building or site.
makes for a more sustainable project because more people have something invested in the project’s success,” Butler said.

It’s a methodology that lets everyone win: Artspace is able to fund their projects, and communities are served more holistically. “We use real estate as a tool for community development, and we spend a lot of time having to explain that,” Mague said.

“I argue that we are the only kind of real estate model that could make [a project as complex as the Bell School site redevelopment] work,” McLearen said. “Without having all those stakeholders at the table, there is no way a building like that, real estate-wise, would pencil out.”

McLearen is currently overseeing the adaptive reuse of a five-story former public school in East Harlem and uses that $52 million project to illustrate his point. The building sat empty for a decade, he said, because no developer could make its redevelopment profitable without tearing down the historic school and replacing it with cheap new construction or adapting the circa 1898 building into luxury condos. But the community wouldn’t allow either option: Its significance to community leaders protected PS 109, “Community leadership in the El Barrio neighborhood saw real estate-wise, for community development, and we spend a lot of time having to explain that,” Mague said.

As HUD, the Department of Transportation and the City of New Orleans continue to research the potential impacts of removing the I-10 overpass with the Livable Claiborne Communities Revitalization Study, it is helpful to look at the history of this corridor to understand how it once flourished. The 1938 Polk’s New Orleans City Directory contains the first reverse look-up listings, which record names in address order. The second directory, 1965, also contains a reverse listing and reflects data compiled during one of the final years before the oaks on Claiborne were cut down and construction began on the highway. By comparing the two, the most striking information revealed is that, while Claiborne Avenue is widely discussed as a former “thriving commercial corridor,” it was a truly mixed-use street filled not only with a variety of businesses but also many homes. Nearly every block along this corridor contained both residential and business listings. This diversity is reflective of a neighborhood where people generally lived, walked, worked and shopped close to home. In discussions with residents of Tremé who lived in the area before the I-10 overpass was built, people frequently cite the corridor’s heavy pedestrian use as its former defining characteristic.

Additionally, these directories show that, in the years from 1938 to 1965, the stretch of Claiborne Avenue in the Sixth and Seventh wards was remarkably stable. In 1938 there were 348 addresses listed between Canal and St. Bernard Avenues. This number increased to 376 addresses in 1965. In both years, 53 percent of the addresses were residences and 35 percent were businesses. The biggest shift was in the size of the business: mid-size businesses constituted 57 percent of all business listings in 1938, but that percentage had increased to 89 percent by 1965. This represented a shift of business owners such as dress makers, clothes pressers, shoe repairers and food vendors, transitioning from working out of their homes to opening store-front operations. More than the numbers were stable — at least 11 businesses, including Heckmann’s Shoe Store, Claiborne Hardware, the LaBranche Pharmacy and Gus Betat & Son Bicycles were open for business through the nearly three decades examined in these directories.

Physically, North Claiborne Avenue is much altered when compared with 1939 Sanborn Maps. Between Canal Street and St. Bernard Avenue, approximately 50 houses have been lost. In some cases entire blocks were torn down in order to build on- and off-ramps for the I-10 overpass. What might be more surprising, however, is that there are approximately 50 buildings that were on the 1939 map that are still standing, though in various states.

There is still more that needs to be researched: Were these businesses sustained by foot or automobile traffic, for example? And what really caused so many businesses to fail in the years following the overpass’ construction? Was the structure itself, in reality, solely to blame? Or was it a more complicated mix of causes, including desegregation of the Canal Street shopping area, and the movement of people, both white and black, to suburban neighborhoods? As the study progresses, understanding what made Claiborne Avenue successful in the past could help make it a more inviting place in the future.
The same federal tax credits will be utilized in the Bell School project, as will Louisiana’s state historic tax credits and federal housing tax credits and municipal appropriations. The Bell School project, as part of its programming. “If we preserve this chapel while at the same time building economic development and sharing new skill sets, and the end of the day the product is an affordable place for living, working and presentation of the arts, that’s a pretty big triple net win,” Butler said.

Artspace’s transformation of the Bell School into permanent affordable housing for Tremé is all the more powerful considering the neighborhood’s multiple possible futures, as is its focus on the preservation of Tremé’s culture, Saulny said. North agrees: “So many artists currently live in or have lived in Tremé — musicians, painters, sculptors, dancers. Having an affordable development dedicated to the artists of Tremé will help the neighborhood to retain its unique culture and spirit.”

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ARTSPACE Focuses on Neighborhoods

In transition, and few would disagree that Tremé fits the bill. While some may argue that the swath of the neighborhood between Claiborne Avenue and Rampart Street has seen increased renovations and an influx of new residents in recent years, the rate of residential restorations in the blocks lakeside of Claiborne, and for buildings on the Claiborne corridor itself, has never compared.

Until recently, these new projects seem to pop up regularly, each bringing fresh hope for restored vibrancy and new opportunities. Of these, the one initiative that could spur the biggest possible shift in Tremé’s economic and social fate is the Livable Claiborne Communities Revitalization Study, a $2.8 million project that is exploring ways to improve the stretch of Claiborne Avenue from Napoleon Avenue to Elysian Fields and the adjacent neighborhoods. The study includes research on what would happen to traffic patterns and neighborhood conditions if the raised I-10 expressway, which under the oaks, residents reclaimed Claiborne two and disrupted the social gathering space of the expressway cut the neighborhood in loss have also been voiced. After construction the overpass’s removal. Concerns about cultural fostered a vital streetscape of businesses, residences and pedestrian traffic — are excited that kind infrastructure has a life span of 30 to 40 years, and the overpass was built in 1968.

Residents who remember Claiborne Avenue as it once was — a grand, oak-lined boulevard that fostered a vital streetscape of businesses, residences and pedestrian traffic — are excited by the prospect. Dialogues within the neighborhood have also shown, however, that many residents fear that the displacement of low-income residents and long-time renters could be a byproduct of the economic development and rising property values that would be spurred by the overpass’s removal. Concerns about cultural loss have also been voiced. After construction of the expressway cut the neighborhood in two and disrupted the social gathering space under the oaks, residents reclaimed Claiborne by meeting underneath the overpass, where the

acoustics, protection from the rain and ample parking are a boon to Mardi Gras Indian tribes and residents who hold regular block parties.

Other neighborhood projects are being uniformly celebrated by residents and officials. The Circle Foods Store, which served for decades as the area’s one-stop-shopping spot for residents wanting groceries, clothes, household items and more, will hopefully reopen later this year on the corner of Claiborne and St. Bernard avenues after owner Dwanye Boudreaux succeeded in securing $8 million in financing — including capital derived from state and federal historic rehab tax credits — to complete its rehabilitation. The store had been shuttered since Katrina. Trumpeter Kermit Ruffins purchased and plans to reopen the Mother-in-Law Lounge on the corner of Claiborne and Columbus Street, long a beloved Tremé bar and music club founded and once operated by local R&B musician Ernie K-Doe. Though Ruffins has not disclosed when he hopes to reopen the club, which has been closed since 2005, fans eagerly await the day.

Another interesting project is housed within a beautiful circa 1925 brick building anchoring the corner of Claiborne and St. Ann Street, once a Canal Savings and Trust bank branch. It was recently purchased by the Carr family. Margaret Carr, a nurse at Oschner Hospital and native of the Lafitte project, has taken on the building’s renovation with her husband David and their two daughters, but they aren’t quite sure yet what it will be. The family has been working with students and faculty from the Tulane Master of Preservation Studies program among others to find a use that could revive arts and culture on the corridor and foster positive community gatherings (but also be financially viable). “I really want to be an igniting force,” Margaret said. “This building is so big and beautiful, I want it to be some sort of cultural arts center — a place where the community can feel good.”

PRC is even restoring a building on the corridor — 1423 N. Claiborne Ave., the last remaining building of the Straight University campus, which was the first African-American university in the city. The circa 1871 home became a flop house later in life, but PRC’s Operation Comeback is restoring the building to a single-family residence. PRC also recently renovated and sold a shotgun at 2404-06 St. Ann St. The new homeowner will live on one side and rent the other at an affordable price. PRC’s Rebuilding Together New Orleans has also been active in the neighborhood: Since 2006, it has completed repairs and restoration work on 62 houses of low-income and/or elderly residents in the Tremé and Esplanade Ridge neighborhoods.

That’s just a smattering. With schools reopened, homes restored and hope for the area’s overall revitalization growing, it is clear that Tremé is in a time of transition. -Danielle Del Sol