

Tomorrow:

The venerable television show "This Old House" is selecting its next project from among four Boston-area homes.

Real Estate

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Cell-to-condo plan proceeds with conviction

Salem hopes developer makes jail house rock

By Jennifer Ehrlich
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The city that once burned accused witches has long made a draw of its haunted past. So, perhaps it's not a stretch for Salem to sell living space in cells where the Boston Strangler once slept.

The historic granite jail complex, with cellblocks that date to 1813, is finally being redeveloped into condos, an upscale restaurant, and artists' space as part of Salem's longtime effort to bring its once thriving downtown back from the dead.

The final plan resulted in part from strong input by Salem residents who wanted the redeveloped complex to have a public component.

Residents "wanted to see a use that would add to the vitality of downtown — and they wanted to be able to get into the jail building," said Lynn Duñcan, executive director of Salem's Redevelopment Authority, which owns the site.

Like many other small cities in the state, Salem is experiencing a renewal; its proximity to a commuter rail line is attracting professionals and suburban empty nesters to a housing market that offers classic older homes in a coastal location.

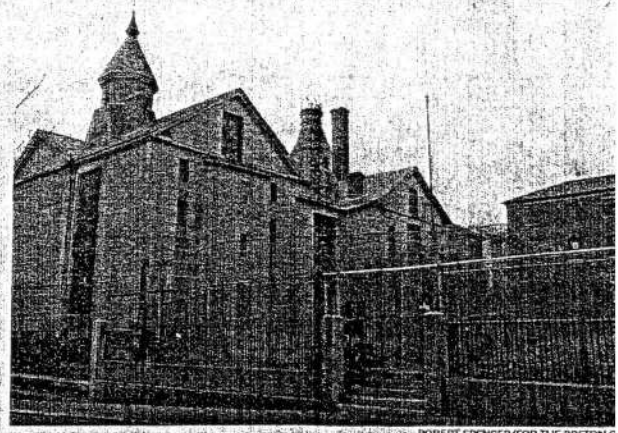
And Salem is also solidifying its reputation as a tourism mecca for day trips and evenings out. Chic restaurants are flourishing in a downtown that was once crushed by the malls out along nearby Route 128.

The expansion of the Peabody Essex Museum, completed in 2003 at a cost of \$194 million, has also helped bring more foot traffic downtown; visits to the museum increased to 200,000 a year, from 75,000 in years before the expansion. And a museum survey found more than 30 percent of those were coming to Salem for the first time, specifically for arts and culture, said Jay Finney, deputy director of marketing.

"Salem used to center around fall, witches, and the occult, but now it's being known for arts and culture, and as a restaurant place," said Finney. "The city is on



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the cusp of coming back."

The Salem Jail complex is within walking distance of both downtown and the waterfront. In addition to the stone prison, it includes a three-story federal-style jail keeper's house and a dilapidated carriage house.

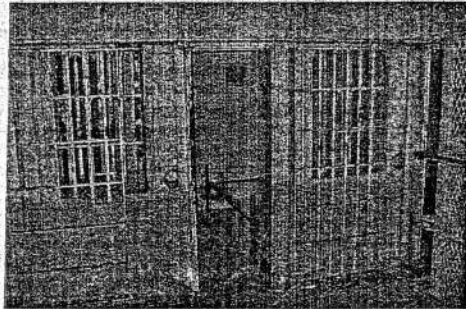
Late last year the redevelopment authority picked New Boston Ventures, which is proposing an \$11.25 million renovation that would include 29 condos, a 4,000-square-foot restaurant, an art gallery, and a public jail history exhibit that would retain several original cells.

New Boston Ventures also plans to add a building, which means the developer and its architect will have to bring together as many as four different architectural styles.

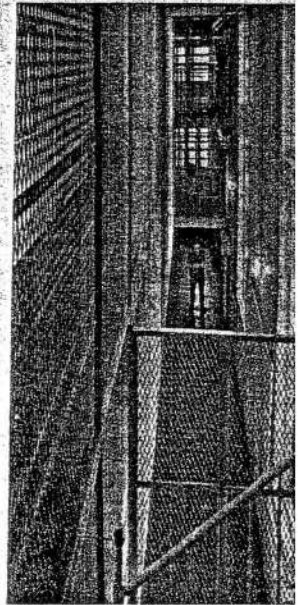
The company intends to demolish most of the jail cells to make way for living space. The original jail building will contain 17 two-bedroom, two-bath condos, and the restaurant; the jail keeper's house will be turned into three townhouses; the carriage house will host an artists' live-work space; and the new building will house eight two-bedroom, two-bath duplexes.

New Boston principal David Goldman said the firm is aiming to market many of

A sketch of the Salem Jail redevelopment proposal (above left) contrasts with the current state of the buildings (above right). Inside, the cells look anything but homey (right), although they were home to many from 1813 to 1991 (far right).



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the units in the \$400,000-\$500,000 range, a price-point he said is often overlooked.

"Part of the interest is people believe, and we believe, it makes good sense to do business in Salem," said Goldman.

When the jailed closed 15 years ago, its reputation for cramped, unsanitary conditions got more attention that the aesthetic value of its cupolas.

But by 1813 standards, the Salem facility represented one of the more humane jail designs of its time: The cells were designed to allow light and air to enter the facility through the windows, rather than

the medieval model of thick cell walls and a tiny window.

The metal cupolas on the rooftop were designed to circulate air: They will become sunlit rooms with ocean views, said project architect James Alexander of Finegold Alexander Associates, the Boston firm that designed The Wang Center for Performing Arts and the Ellis Island National Monument and Museum of Immigration project in New York.

The jail "is a survivor, but it's more than a survivor. It's a survivor with style," he said.