New Life for Historic Schuster's Building

A landmark of Milwaukee's Historic Mitchell Street shopping district is getting a new lease on life through a $15 million project that will restore much of the original exterior appearance of the structure but with a very different interior focus.

A Pewaukee-based group is redeveloping the building that once housed the Schuster's Department Store at 1020-1030 W. Historic Mitchell St., with the FJA Christiansen Roofing Co. handling the elaborate roofing and sheet metal work for the project. FJA Christiansen is working under coordination with Gilbane Building Co., who is serving as the Construction Manager of this multi-faceted project.

The Schuster's name is familiar to long-time Milwaukeeans, many who remember shopping at the neighborhood department stores either by themselves or with their parents. Unlike other department stores, Schuster's were only located in neighborhood shopping districts, not in downtown Milwaukee. (As a historical note, Schuster's is recognized as having introduced the concept of retail trading stamps. It started issuing them in 1890 in a practice that was later expanded upon by the Sperry & Hutchinson Co. as S&H Green Stamps).

The Schuster's name officially left the retail scene in 1962 when Gimbels purchased the four Schuster's stores, but the stores informally were then referred to as Gimbels-Schuster's. The Mitchell Street location was closed in 1984, and the Gimbels name eventually was lost in the retail world due to a series of mergers and acquisitions.

But the Schuster's buildings remained as bulwarks of their respective Milwaukee neighborhoods, even if use of the buildings was minimalized. Along with Mitchell Street, Schusters were located at 12th and Vliet, Third and Garfield, Capitol Court, and Packard Plaza (Cudahy). The Capitol Court structure was razed when that shopping center was redeveloped in 2002.

The Mitchell Street building, with 156,000 square feet of space, eventually became the Mitchell Street Mall. Now, Schuster Historic Building, LLC, has begun a redevelopment project that will involve creation of 90 apartments, with many of those units to be marketed under affordable-housing guidelines. The others will be rented at market rates. With 15-foot ceiling heights on each of the four floors, the apartments will be developed loft-style.

A lightwell being cut into the existing structure will bring natural light into

those apartment units, with that lightwell just one element of the extensive roof work FJA Christiansen is handling, said Steve Stuckey, the FJA Christiansen project manager for the Schuster Historic Building.

The building's façade will be restored to original condition – historic designation rules apply. Yet, the roof will be significantly changed, partly due to the lightwell addition, but also due to the addition of a garden patio on the north side and the tremendously different roofing techniques used today.

About two-thirds of the main roof was covered with a wooden structure built over a concrete deck. The wooden structure was as high as 6 feet in some areas, sloping down to the drains. The other one-third of the main roof had two inches of concrete poured over a gravel slag mixture that was 16 to 24 inches thick, sloping to drains.

"It required an extremely elaborate tear-off," Stuckey said, noting the tremendous amount of rubble that had to be removed, including more than 15 30-yard boxes of debris for the wood structure and another dozen such boxes for the concrete and slag.

A temporary roof consisting of two plies of fiberglass felts with interply moppings of asphalt was then put in place to allow other rooftop work to continue on the south portion of the structure. Elaborate scaffolding was put in place for the lightwell that was cut into the building, and a temporary roof structure also had to be created to cover the lightwell.

Removal of the wooden structure and concrete-over-slag system required relocation of the roof drains. The project also involves new sheet metal (including intricate copper work), counter- flashings, coping, tuck pointing, and reroofing and siding of five penthouses, with new gutter and downspout systems. FJA Christiansen is also doing the sheet metal siding inside of the new lightwell.

The new roof will be comprised of EPS (expanded polystyrene), tapered to give the new roofing system a slope to drain. A new 60-mil EPDM roofing membrane will cover that EPS insulation base, with stone ballast atop the membrane. The penthouses will have fully adhered EPDM roofing.

The original Schuster's sign and the original flagpole will remain atop the roof.

Also remaining on the roof are cellular telephone transmitters that created an unusual challenge for the FJA Christiansen roofing crews.

"There are several cellular towers on the roof, and that equipment emits microwaves," Stuckey said. "Exposure to those microwaves for more than a half-hour could be dangerous. Because

FJAC crews begin major demolition of old slope to drain wood structure.

of the risks involved with microwaves, we were limited as to when we could work on the roof. We need to get the towers turned off to work on the penthouses. That has been easier said than done. The only times the cellular companies would shut down the transmitters was from midnight to 6 a.m."

Joining Stuckey in key roles in the project are FJA Christiansen's Greg Johnson as project superintendent, demolition crew manager Lenny Schiller, sheet metal superintendent Jeff Keller, sheet metal foreman, Ned Hochuli, and Matt Reuter as crew manager for the installation of the new roof.

It's anticipated that the roof work will be completed by late August.