

# DIXIE BREWERY

---

Saving a Landmark

studio **NOVA**

WHITE PAPER - JULY 2012

### A FADED ICON

The industrial brick building standing on the northwest corner of Tulane Avenue and Tonti Street in New Orleans has seen better days. Windows are broken and the frame is collapsing. Cracks ascend the central dome, and vines eat away at what little structural integrity remains. Inside, conditions are worse: years earlier, an entire floor collapsed onto the one below, and streaks of water damage abound. Mold is the only inhabitant, along with a few stray birds.

The Dixie Brewery, a familiar landmark and a New Orleans icon, is in such poor repair, most engineers would probably recommend demolishing it outright. However, in recognition of the brewery's contributions to the city's culture, history, and physical fabric, the building's new owner, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), is working not only to keep the most historic part of the structure standing, but to return it to active use.

When the new Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System (SLVHCS) medical center project is completed, the Dixie Brewery will provide a standard-setting VA research building and a resource for the Veterans who have served our country, even as it continues to anchor the Mid-City skyline for residents of New Orleans.

### A LOCAL LEGACY



Dixie Brewery

The historic tower building of Dixie Brewery, designed by Louis Lehle, a German-born architect with many brewery buildings to his credit throughout the Midwest, was completed in 1907. Built in a red-brick German Romanesque style with a steel and cast-iron frame and concrete floor slabs, the building became an instant landmark. Its most prominent feature: the silver-colored, plaster dome atop the central brick tower, which many thought to be metal, and where giant green letterforms announced “Dixie Beer.” Subsequent additions expanded the facility with a clapboard extension to the west in 1919, and warehouses accumulated between 1934 and 1954 behind the main building. It operated continuously—including during Prohibition, when it briefly became the “Dixie Beverage Company”—even as the building began to age and deteriorate.

As for the beer itself, it wasn't the taste, but the hometown connection that mattered. "People hold the brand name near and dear to their hearts," says Cynthia Dubberley, an associate with Eskew+Dumez+Ripple, project architect on the SLVHCS medical center, and long-time New Orleans resident.

Dixie was one of several local manufacturers with a civic presence; other notables included the Jax Brewery, converted to a retail center in 1984, and the Falstaff Brewery, which became an apartment building in 2007. Following those conversions, Dixie became the last of New Orleans' original 19th-century breweries, and it continued to produce beer in the city until August 2005.

---

"You'll go into somebody's backyard and find an old Dixie sign as decoration. It really is a local landmark that people have a lot of personal connection to."

Cynthia Dubberley, Eskew+Dumez+Ripple

---



#### DISREPAIR

That August, of course, saw the arrival of Hurricane Katrina, which did massive damage to the brewery, as it did to so many of the city's institutions. But the building was in trouble even before the storm. Dubberley lists off the preexisting conditions: structural issues, cracking walls, and failing masonry lintels. Katrina only made things worse. The building flooded to a depth of 10 feet, and long after the waters receded, rain continued to penetrate through hundreds of broken windows. Squatters took up residence, and vandals looted all the copper pipes and equipment. The structure's condition became critical. "In fact," Dubberley recalls, "since I first started working on the project in 2008, I've seen one of the walls, in an area that we were originally planning to keep, actively collapsing as time goes on and as more and more bricks fall off."

The brewery's owners had moved production of Dixie beer to Wisconsin while they figured out how to deal with the damaged property. Soon after, the city of New Orleans proposed a 12-block, 30-acre Mid-City site—which included Dixie Brewery—as the location for a new, state-of-the-art VA medical center that would replace the one destroyed in the hurricane. From the very beginning, VA worked with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and community partners to balance the need for a new health care facility with the community's desire for historic preservation, and immediately set out to find a new use for the brewery—and fast, before it became completely unsalvageable.

#### PLANNING A NEW LIFE

Dixie was one of several structures selected for partial adaptive reuse. The Pan American Life Insurance Building, a small 1952 International Style gem designed by Skidmore Owings & Merrill, is the first slated for rehabilitation. It will become a home base for the new medical center's staff recruitment efforts, and will house other administrative offices thereafter. Four architecturally distinctive shotgun houses will also be retained onsite for physical rehabilitation purposes.



Pan American Life Insurance Building

Not only architecture, but horticulture will be preserved as well: several old-growth trees will remain along the perimeter of the site. “The trees really define the character of Canal Street,” said Jason Richardson, a principal architect with NBBJ, who notes that greenery is an important part of VA's effort to sensitively integrate the new facility into the existing neighborhood. Furthermore, while three blocks of Banks Street will be closed to traffic, a green corridor will preserve residents' tree-lined views to the east.

Those elements were a cinch, compared to the challenges of planning the rehabilitation of Dixie Brewery. First, the project team had to determine which function was best suited for the building, for preservation to make sense. The team quickly realized that two programs—the Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center (PRRC), and the research laboratories—being somewhat independent of a hospital's daily operations, could occupy the Dixie site at a slight distance from the main medical facility. However, the aged brewery building could not accommodate a laboratory's demanding parameters for climate control, vibration, or mechanical equipment. Therefore, a new building would have to be constructed behind and integrated into historic parts of the Dixie Brewery.

Next, the project team had to determine which portions of the iconic Dixie Brewery could be salvaged while remaining fiscally responsible. The Tulane Avenue façade, with its historic dome and open-air carriageway, was top priority for both VA and the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation. On the other hand, the wood-framed additions built after 1907, thoroughly rotted, required demolition. Some sections of the steel-framed, brick-clad structure unfortunately were beyond repair as well. “Ideally,” Dubberley said, “we would have loved to have saved more of the original 1907 building. But we had to make some concessions to where the existing structure had just completely failed, where one floor slab had fallen on top of another.”

#### IN WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

The final design preserves and repairs the six and four-story sections of Dixie Brewery that face Tulane Avenue, while behind rises the new, five-story building, clad in masonry panels to echo the brick of the historic building.

---

“It’s about authenticity, the idea that buildings should reflect the era in which they’re built. It’s about respectfully connecting a modern building to a historic one.”

Jason Richardson, NBBJ

---



Some distinctive features of the brewery’s architecture must be recreated from scratch. For instance, shortly after the city of New Orleans took control of the site, the brewery’s front doors and wrought-iron carriageway gates disappeared. Unless they are found and returned, the designers will have to reconstruct those elements based on historic photographs. The windows too, in order to meet federal blast criteria and withstand Category 3 storms—and eliminate the original asbestos-filled caulk—will be replaced with modern glass that approximates the look and feel of the original design.

The most critical modification of all, however, is the structural remediation of the brewery. Even the Tulane Avenue-facing section, the most stable portion of the building, requires significant intervention to prevent total structural failure. Steel reinforcement will be added to the load-bearing walls, by drilling a grid of vertical and horizontal holes into the brick, inserting rebar, tensioning the new steel, and then grouting around it. The ceiling beams and the waterproof roof membrane will be repaired or replaced. Insulation will be upgraded with a more efficient, asbestos-free alternative. And an entirely new floor slab must be built to replace the one that collapsed, along with new columns to hold it up.

“Just as the Dixie Brewery architecture speaks of its time, in 19th-century New Orleans,” said Mark Brideweser, project executive with the VA Office of Construction & Facilities Management, “the new VA research building will speak of our time, of contemporary New Orleans.”

---

“Our goal is not only to balance the new with the old, but to celebrate the differences between them.”

Mark Brideweser, VA Office of Construction & Facilities Management

---



Though all the historic brick will be cleaned and repaired, and replaced when necessary, weathering and other signs of age will be allowed to remain as much as possible. Inside, the Dixie Brewery will be given new life by the researchers and Veterans who come there to work and be treated. One of them, perhaps, sitting in the lobby or in one of the collaborative lounges, will look across the courtyard and up to the brewery dome, and will consider the building’s shift from industrial production to research and healing. It’s a story made visible in the architecture of the Dixie Brewery, and a story with special resonance in a city like New Orleans, still finding a way to preserve its traditions as it moves toward the future.

studio **NOVA**

DIXIE BREWERY | SAVING A LANDMARK | WHITE PAPER - JULY 2012