

Walgreens To Move into Historic D.C. Restaurant

Story by Margaret Foster / Apr. 26, 2007

The Washington, D.C., restaurant that was the site of 1962's Cuban Missile Crisis negotiations will become a Walgreens.

Yesterday the city's historic preservation review board approved a developer's revised proposal to build an addition onto the Chinese restaurant and alter its facade. At the board's request, Rust, Orling and Neale, Architects, will return the restaurant to its 1945 appearance, retaining features like its diamond windows and Carrara glass panels.

"We've really addressed every single concern [the board] had," says principal Mark Orling, based in Alexandria, Va. The firm's researchers found one photo of the former restaurant and based their design on that image, Orling says. "We're working off of a postcard."

The drugstore, located about a block from a CVS, will be the first Walgreens in Washington, D.C. (Another Walgreens is under construction in the city.)

"[Walgreens] saw it as an opportunity to create something that will make a statement and be very visible and also be part of a community," says Randall Clarke, development manager for Mid-Atlantic Commercial Properties, a division of Fort Lauderdale-based Morgan Property Group, which is redeveloping the property for Walgreens. "We've also agreed to put up something on the building describing the history of the property."

Walgreens was "pretty accommodating," says Joan Habib, president of Cleveland Park Historical Society, which recommended that the board approve the revised plans. "We tried to persuade them to maintain as much of the current look as possible because the neighborhood thinks of it as an important place, which, historically, it is."

Yenching Palace opened in 1955, serving Henry Kissinger, Mick Jagger, George Balanchine, Ann Landers, Art Garfunkel, I.M. Pei, Bob Woodward, and Carl Bernstein, according to its guest book. Now a city landmark, the restaurant is actually two buildings, one constructed in 1925 and the other in 1928, which merged in 1945 to form the Seafare Restaurant.

Yenching Palace's longtime owners, the Lung family, plans to close the business this summer and lease the building to Walgreens, which will gut the interior, strip the neon sign and replace it with its own logo.

The building's most famous features—its neon sign, its wood booths, one of which may have FBI bugs—may end up in a museum.

"We have spoken to a couple of museums; one has expressed an interest in one of the booths and someone else has expressed in the sign," Clarke says. "We're more than open to talking to people [about salvage]," he says.

After yesterday's approval, the city will issue a permit for the changes to the building, and construction will begin this summer.

Neighbors like Habib aren't particularly surprised that the D.C. institution is closing. "They rose to great fame at some point, with Henry Kissinger changing the world in the restaurant," she says. "The front of the place got crummier and crummier, the food got worse, the business was failing, and they sold. That's kind of the arc that lots of buildings follow."