

Historic site regains stature

Work to begin early next year on Province Street high-rise

By Thomas C. Palmer Jr.

GLOBE STAFF

Construction will begin early next year on a 31-floor tower along Province Street downtown, bringing fancy homes back to the historic Boston street more than two centuries after some of the city's most prosperous families settled there.

Since the 1950s, 45 Province St., half a block from Old City Hall and across a narrow alley from the Omni Parker House, has been occupied by a 13-story brick parking garage and the pint-sized Littlest Bar.

Now The Abbey Group of Boston – partners who ran music clubs in Kenmore Square in the 1970s, graduated to developing property in the 1980s, and who have become part-owners of the Boston Celtics – are building 150 luxury condominiums near the heart of Boston's business district.

The garage, which hugs the old granite steps that go awkwardly up to Bosworth Street and Cafe Marliave, and which employs what in the 1950s were state-of-the-art vehicle elevators, will be demolished. As previously reported, The Littlest Bar, doing business since the end of World War II, will close.

That will clear the way on the shallow quarter-acre site for 25 floors of condos over nine floors of above- and below-ground parking, plus a large, three-level restaurant.

A 31-story spire is tall for the low-rise neighborhood. Abbey Group chief executive Robert Epstein said the 60-by-250-foot site isn't commercially viable without such height, and a City Hall ever in favor of housing agrees.

"This is an absolutely appropriate place for that level of density," said Boston Redevelopment Authority spokesperson Susan Elsbree. "It will bring the vitality and 24-hour character we want to the neighborhood."

The architect, Simeon Bruner of Bruner/Cott of Cambridge, said both the materials – glass and tan terra cotta prefabricated panels – and the "stepping down" of sections of the building to four different heights help it fit the character of the neighborhood.

"The issue for us was how to design a building which was two-thirds of the entire length of the block and not have it be monolithic in a historic district," said Bruner.

The firm has had a lot of time to think about that. Bruner/Cott started designing a 13-floor office building for the site in 1988. But the market for office space evaporated, and when the developers took a shot at a hotel and residences in the 1990s, that didn't work either.

Then came the current, seemingly endless residential boom – and the city's willingness to let developers go higher. The Abbey Group didn't want to just re-create the past with brick.

"There's a confluence in Boston of glass and masonry," Bruner said. The building he designed "relates old materials to new and is somewhere in the middle, but clearly new," he said.

The 45 Province St. residences have no formal name or image for marketing purposes yet, but Province House is a name with a rich Boston history.

Until 1833, Province Street was known as Governor's alley, on back side of the Province House mansion, so-called because it was the residence for Colonial governors.



Developers will raze a parking garage (left, Globe photo) on Province Street to build a 31-story tower with condos, retail space, and a restaurant (right, Abbey Group).

Peter Sergeant, a London businessman and also a judge in the Salem witch trials, built the home in 1679 but quickly yielded to governors with names like Gage and Howe, when they found it comfortable. The roof at one point carried a landmark copper wind vane in the shape of an Indian with a bow and arrow.

Province House was later a tavern and minstrel theater, before being torn down in the 1920s.

For much of its existence, Province Street itself was 10 feet wide with 15-inch sidewalks. In the 1920s, amid allegations of political payoffs, the city widened it to what pedestrians experience today. The developers will expand one sidewalk a little more and add landscaping and new street lights.

Epstein and his brother, David, who is also his partner and president of The Abbey Group, which also created the Landmark Center out of the old Sears building in the Fenway, stood on Province recently gazing at the parking garage. "This is a gem of a block destroyed by what was here," he said. "We are going to make the landmark of the future, not replicate the past."

There will be parking for 294 cars, about the same number being eliminated in the existing garage and adjacent surface lot. Some will be available for the public.

The Abbey Group, including partner and chief financial officer John Svenson, distinguished itself in the 1980s by rehabbing Back Bay residences with spiffy, high-quality interiors. The Orpin Group of Easton, and Celeste Cooper of New York are designing the interiors of 45 Province St., which will include outdoor space with more than half of the units.

A pool will top the nine-floor wing, nearest School Street, with an adjacent fitness facility, and a rooftop terrace on the tallest building will offer unchallenged 360-degree views. Even "the lower-level units are higher than in most any residential building in the city," said Robert Epstein.

Opening is scheduled for spring of 2008; prices haven't been set.