

PAINFUL PAST, FANCY FUTURE:

Doors open on new era: Boutique hotel ready to launch at Winecoff site

By Leon Stafford

If you had asked Tom O'Leary several years ago if he would be standing today in a gleaming lobby at 176 Peachtree St., he would have thought you were off your rocker.

After all, for more than a decade, the 15-story downtown structure was boarded up, abandoned and crumbling. The only signs of life were the homeless folks who sometimes took refuge there to ask passers-by for spare change.

But here O'Leary is, checking last-minute preparations for the building's official opening on Monday as the Ellis Hotel, the new boutique hotel housed in the structure some know as the Winecoff Hotel, site of the 1946 blaze that took 119 lives and was known as the nation's deadliest hotel fire.

After a \$26.8 million renovation that took years and gutted the building to the studs, the Ellis is at last ready for business, said O'Leary, the hotel's general manager.

"This is a relaxed, exciting destination that is different from the other hotels downtown," O'Leary said. "It's quaint, it's small, it's not impersonal."

Designed with a contemporary flair — the walls and floors are deep brown and the furniture retro — the Ellis features 127 rooms with ostrich-leather headboards set against bamboo-accent walls, flat-screen TVs, radios with iPod docks and wireless Internet. There are two meeting rooms, a business center, a gym and a restaurant. And for security-minded women travelers, one floor has been set aside for them exclusively.

The reinvention of the building as the Ellis will begin a new chapter for the structure, which was built in 1913. For years, it was one of the area's tallest hotels.

It gained notoriety nationally when the famous fire broke out. The building had no fire escapes, fire doors or automatic sprinklers, and firetruck ladders were not designed to reach the highest floors.

In latter years, developers tried using it once again as a hotel and later as a retirement home, but nothing had staying power, and the building became an eyesore on the downtown Atlanta landscape for more than a decade.

Then in 2000, RD Management LLC, a New York company, purchased the building for \$2.2 million with plans to return it to its former glory.

"Many times we've been excited about similar projects for this property," said Mark Vaughan, executive vice president, chief sales and marketing officer for the Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau. "None of those occasions came to fruition. We're looking forward to the Ellis playing a part in our business. The new hotel will provide business travelers with a unique experience and gives us diversity in our hotel package. Its tradition and uniqueness tell a piece of Atlanta's story."



The Ellis Hotel at the Winecoff Site

While the building's past is well-known, most of those interested in the fire are local, O'Leary said.

"I haven't seen that much interest [in the fire] from the regional and national market yet," he said.

O'Leary points out that the fire system is up to code and in some cases "beyond code" in an effort to make sure guests feel secure.

And he said he doesn't see the building's history as hurting his ability to sell rooms.

"The historical nature of the building is on the outside from the brick and the mortar and the location," he said. "But when you walk into the building, you are walking into the future."

HISTORY OF THE BUILDING

1913: Winecoff Hotel is constructed.

Dec. 7, 1946: Fire begins about 3:30 a.m. 119 die, including owner William F. Winecoff and 30 Georgia high school students.

1951: Hotel reopens as the Peachtree on Peachtree.

1967: Owner Fred Beazley gives hotel to the Georgia Baptist Convention, which converts it into apartments for seniors.

1981: Developer Charles Ackerman buys structure with intention to redo it as an office building. Later he considers demolishing it or turning it into a small luxury hotel.

1995: Developers Cecil Phillips and Chris Humphreys contract to buy the hotel and turn it into loft apartments for students/workers.

1998: Courtney Dillard acquires the hotel and announces plans to redevelop it as a luxury hotel.

1999: RBJF Atlanta acquires Winecoff for \$1.25 million in September.

2006: Kelco/FB Winecoff begins renovation.

Oct. 15: Ellis opens.