

Green future in L'Etoile renovation
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The new owner of a 106-year-old building on Capitol Square has plans to highlight the site's nationally renowned restaurant, create space for several businesses and eventually add a grass-covered rooftop.

Sonya Newenhouse is refurbishing 25 N. Pinckney St. - home to the critically acclaimed restaurant L'Etoile - "to draw out the elements of the beautiful, historic building and to bring it closer to the street with big open windows," she said.

And Newenhouse, founder of eco-consulting firm Madison Environmental Group, said she is dedicated to making the project "green."

Newenhouse recently purchased the building from L'Etoile's proprietor and chef, Odessa Piper, who has run the restaurant for 27 years.

Piper will continue operating her restaurant and bakery-caf on the building's first and second floors. She has plans to expand the cafe's hours and offerings, and to enlarge the first-floor dining area.

Meanwhile, Newenhouse will move Madison Environmental Group to the building's third floor and start a car-sharing business there. Beginning next month, Community Car will allow its members to rent cars by the hour, Newenhouse said.

Although there were other potential buyers, Piper said she decided to sell to Newenhouse because the women share the desire to "celebrate the spirit of the place" as well as other values.

"I'm excited to see where collaboration will take us," Piper said.

The cooperation started with the \$750,000 sale of the building, done through a land contract. Instead of financing a traditional mortgage with a lender, the agreement allows Newenhouse to make monthly payments to Piper, buying it from her over time. In turn, the money goes towards paying off Piper's original mortgage and allows her to fulfill plans to expand the cafe.

"It's a great way to help each other out," Newenhouse said, "and for small businesses to stay downtown."

Ald. Mike Verveer, 4th District, said he's "thrilled that a prime historic building will be given a historically and environmentally sensitive facelift."

Newenhouse said she has named the structure the Crescent Building after the Crescent Clothing Co., a longtime tenant that opened there in 1908.

Changes to the interior and exterior will occur in stages that accommodate the businesses' schedules, and are being financed on the building's equity, the women said.

While the sturdy limestone faade will be preserved, the building's recessed alcove entryway will be replaced with a glass frontage.

This will move the cafe about 10 feet closer to the sidewalk and create space for a wine bar and espresso counter, Piper said.

Also, the stairway entry leading to the second-floor restaurant will be redone, the upstairs seating changed and waiter station enclosed, she said.

The third floor, which has been used as storage and office space, is undergoing renovation to become offices for Newenhouse's businesses. The wood floor has been stripped and refinished and the walls reinsulated and painted using natural products, Newenhouse said. An old skylight will also be uncovered to take advantage of natural light.

Many of the building materials were recycled or salvaged, such as soundboard, doors, light fixtures and banisters, Newenhouse said.

Potter Design Group and Mascott Brothers Construction have been hired to do the project, but Newenhouse said she and her employees are putting in a lot of "sweat equity" as well.

Once the renovation is complete, tentative plans for the green roof may include grass, shrubs and edible flowers, the women said.

The project is expected to be completed by March 2004