



12/19/2007 1:05:00 PM

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After the storm, a glimmer of hope

'Big Red' owner hopes to rebuild with public and private support

By David Plechl

For The Daily Astorian

Two weeks after winds ripped the roof from his 110-year-old waterfront property, Royal Nebeker pounds nail after nail through tarps into the floor of what was once his art studio and the top floor of a historic icon of Astoria's past.

Nebeker, a 62 year-old artist and art professor, was trying to keep an afternoon downpour from leaking into the bottom two floors. Working alone and sheathed in a green rainsuit, Nebeker was nearly finished smoothing out the layers of plastic like a sheet over a bed.

"That's where my studio was, right there, I was painting in there," said Nebeker pointing to a vacant, roofless, wall-less space that drops 30 feet into open river, and beyond that, fades into a horizon of hills.

An internationally acclaimed painter and printmaker, as well as an Oregon Arts Commissioner, Nebeker was preparing artwork for upcoming shows in Seattle and Germany. He estimates that he lost about one year's work, valued at nearly \$500,000.

The artwork was minimally insured, and natural disaster insurance on the 25,000 square-foot structure was financially out of reach for Nebeker and his small band of artists.

Although official estimates and assessments are not yet in on the costs and feasibility of restoring the structure, Nebeker said the cost of replacing the roof alone might top \$1 million.

"We're looking for support from the community and the private sector and there's a lot of people stepping forward," said Nebeker. "I've had a lot of crews out here with a dozen people helping. This floor was all covered with rubble from the roof. I could never have done this without a lot of help."

Nebeker hopes that support from the community will continue. He said offers from the public sector



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Royal Nebeker is hopeful that public and private support might restore "Big Red" after wind gusts ripped the roof from the top floor and destroyed much of his artwork. The 25,000-square-foot structure sustained extensive damage in the Dec. 2-3 storms and was not insured against natural disaster.



Before the storm, a boat hoist anchored the southwest corner at left. Fierce gusts as well as driving waves eventually led to its collapse.

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have not yet arrived, but said help from the government might be on the way.

Nebeker has been told by some city officials that access to Federal Emergency Management Agency funds might be one potential option.

For now, Nebeker is as realistic as he is optimistic.

"We're not reconstructing now," said Nebeker. "All we're doing right now is plugging the holes and keeping the water and wind out of the building."

Net Loft has rich history

The structure was completed in 1897 after striking fishermen decided they needed their own canneries, transfer stations and waterfront facilities. A co-op was formed and three structures that still stand today on Astoria's waterfront were born: Alderbrook Station, Uniontown Station and this building, the Union Fishermen's Cooperative Net Loft, or Uppertown Station.

"Big Red" was primarily used as a transfer station for fish and a drying structure for wet nets. Boats were hoisted from the river directly into the building for maintenance and painting.

A classic example of clean, utilitarian, Scandinavian architecture, the structure was used by the fishing and marine industry for 90 years.

John Goodenberger, local preservation consultant with Ecola Architects PC in Cannon Beach, said the net shed is the last of its type and should be restored.

"Everyone knows that building. Everyone relates to that building being a part of our past," said Goodenberger.

"To me, that building has always represented a certain amount of hope, that we could always have a real Astoria building on our waterfront," he said "Sometimes these things just disappear in the night. The fact that there's that much left, means it still has a chance."

Nebeker bought the building a decade ago, saving it from demolition. He spent several years bringing the building up to code so that it might be used as studio space for himself and other artists.

The setting has played host to musical events in recent years and several movies have been partially filmed there, usually horror movies. In the last few years, the structure had provided studio space to artists.

Sitting high on pilings, 50 yards out into the river, the building strikes an elegant and inspiring stance. For many locals, the building is a part of the fabric and soul of Astoria itself. Like the Astoria Column, the Astoria Bridge and the Columbia River, few imagine Astoria without it.

"I think it's the only building just like this left, that is a remnant of the fishing industry between San Francisco and Seattle," said Nebeker. "It's definitely an emblem of the history of Astoria."

A harrowing ordeal

Nebeker and friend Eddie Park arrived at the building early Sunday morning, Dec. 2. The two immediately started hammering plywood over windows in an attempt to keep the wind out.

The situation quickly proved to be beyond their control. A pane of glass broke free, hit Nebeker broadside and shattered across his back.

Shortly afterward, Park suffered a broken arm when a gust of wind knocked him off his feet. Nebeker said the focus shifted from saving the building and the art to saving themselves.

Nebeker and Park hunkered down on the second floor to wait out the worst of the wind in the northeast corner of the building. Their sense of relative security didn't last long.

"A foot away from Eddie, the wall just took off," recalls Nebeker. "Then we knew we weren't going to be able to wait it out."

The collapse of the boat hoist, which occupied the southwest corner of the building, exposed them to dangerous winds that initially prevented them from gaining access to the foot bridge to shore.

After managing to cut off the wind to the stairwell, Nebeker and Park eventually got through to the exit. But when they gazed down the long narrow walk to shore, they noticed many of the 3-by-12 inch floorboards had been blown from the walkway. Their anxiety deepened as the wind continued to blow.

"We saw pieces of the building go," said Nebeker. "We didn't know if the whole thing was going to go."

He said it wasn't so much the gusts, but the consistency of the wind. The sound was deafening.

The building stood up to the gusts for 20 hours before any structural damage became apparent. Nebeker said the building swayed very little, but there was so much wind noise inside that he and Park didn't even hear the roof being torn off.

James Defeo, owner of Astoria Coffeehouse, watched from his house directly above the net shed on Irving Street, as waves and winds slashed at the structure.

He watched as the roof took flight in several pieces and saw the boat hoist "just cave in."

"It was horrible. It was just disintegrating throughout the day," he said. "We were just expecting it all to be gone the next time we looked."

But "Big Red" did not succumb to the wind and waves. Park and Nebeker eventually made it out, 24 hours after they had arrived. Both were bruised and battered.

Hopes still high

Despite the scale of the damage, Nebeker refuses to give up on the building, and his dream of an art-fueled, working waterfront.

"We're looking for money to do a historic restoration," he explained.

Nebeker said the goal is still an art center, but one that might combine a municipal gallery with workspace for artists, or even a private marina. He wants to see the structure rebuilt as a mixed-use culture and arts center. He sees potential partners in the educational, arts and fishing communities.

The building reflects the heritage of Astoria's working waterfront, and Nebeker hopes to continue that tradition but within the realm of arts and culture.

Nebeker said at this point, the effort to save the building "is still in emergency mode."

The history of the building however, is clearly at a turning point.

"It's definitely the end of what we were doing. We don't have the resources to do this now. It's the end of our enterprise, but it could be the beginning of the next phase. It could be a blessing in disguise," he said.

Nebeker knew he would have to eventually partner with public and private agencies to realize the potential of the building.

"Now we're forced to make that jump," he said.

For now, fundraisers and art auctions have been planned. Engineers and architects have been called, and city officials are assessing the damage as well as access to funds.

On this day, as Nebeker kept working, the sound of hammering moved out across the river. The rain had lightened and the sun broke through a misty, dark gray sky.

Nebeker paused for a moment, then turned his head skyward.

"I'm taking it as a sign," he said, then returned to hammering.

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