

Fitger's Brewery Rehabilitation Case Study

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1. Intro

a. Building Typology

The first brewery in Minnesota, the Yoerg Brewery, opened in St. Paul in 1849. Soon after the Yoerg Brewery opened, other local breweries began springing up throughout the territory, and later the state. These local breweries were typically designed as either one large building that housed all of the brewing processes, or as a complex made up of smaller buildings built for specific steps in the process. Breweries built as a complex typically went through numerous building phases, based on the growth of the company and changes in brewing practices. Local and regional breweries were extremely popular until the 1910s when transportation improvements meant that goods could be shipped further distances in a short amount of time. The advancements in transportation helped to create national breweries, which claimed an increasing share in the market.

The enactment of the 18th amendment on January 16, 1920 further affected local breweries. Many local breweries ceased operations due to a lack of funds to shift production to legal drinks, such as soft drinks, or because the owners did not wish to produce beverages other than beer or liquor. The breweries that did survive the prohibition movement were typically larger facilities that had the capital to shift production until the 18th amendment was repealed by the 21st amendment in December 1933.

Because breweries were extremely massive structures or complexes built over a period of time, their architectural style is often a paired down version of various popular styles. Common styles include Functionalism (interior functions dictate the building's size and location of details and fenestration), Gothic Revival, and other Classical revivals. Some of the restored or rehabilitated breweries in Minnesota include: the Grain Belt Brewery in Minneapolis and Schells Brewery in New Ulm. There are also a number of breweries in Minnesota that are waiting for rehabilitation, including the Hamm Brewery and the Schmidt Brewery, both in St. Paul. This case study will focus on the rehabilitation of the Fitger Brewery in Duluth.

b. Specific Building Intro



Figure 1: Historic Photo of Fitger's Brewery. Photo courtesy of Fitger's Inn

Fitger's, located at 600 East Superior Street in Duluth, MN is an excellent example of how a brewery complex can be rehabilitated into a multifunctional space, catering to both local residents and tourists. The brick complex was built for the Lake Superior Brewery between 1881 and 1911 with

Michael Fink and Louis Lehle designing a number of key

buildings.¹ Originally known as the Lake Superior Brewery, the complex was renamed the A. Fitger & Company in 1885. It later became known as "The Fitger Brewery" and eventually just "Fitger's." In 1982 from The Fitger Brewing Company was purchased by developer Ronald J. Jacob on behalf of The Brewery Corporation. In 1994, the property was sold to a group local business men and women who continue to rehabilitate the structure to meet modern needs. The former brewing complex was individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a single building in 1984.

2. History/Property Background

Construction of the brewery began in 1886 when the A. Fitger & Company - Lake Superior Brewery, owned by August Fitger and Percy Anneke, began an extensive building program to overhaul a brewery that was originally built on the site in 1869.² A number of architects designed buildings for the brewery from 1886 to 1911, including Chicago based

¹ The major building project took place between 1886 and 1911, though a gymnasium was built for the complex in 1920.

² *Fitger's Brewery National Register of Historic Places Nomination* (Washington D.C.: National Park Service, 1984), located in the Fitger's Brewery file, St. Louis County Resources File, Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

brewery architect Louis Lehle and Duluth architects Oliver Traphagen and Francis Fitzpatrick.³ The brewery was designed as a functional styled complex, where the original use of each building dictated the design and construction of the buildings.⁴ While functional in overall style, the Brewery does show the influence of the Richardsonian Romanesque style in many of the buildings, including “the Stock Houses, Mill House, Office, and the Bottling Works which front on Superior Street.”⁵ The primary materials used for the brewery were Chicago Brick, Basalt, and Sandstone – the latter two being locally available and produced materials.⁶ The total cost for the Bottling Works building, designed by Louis Lehle in 1907, was \$40,000. Louis Lehle also designed the Fitger’s office building in 1908, which was constructed for \$25,000.⁷

The Fitger Brewery was owned and operated by August Fitger and Percy Anneke until 1920 when August Fitger sold his portion of the brewery back to Percy Anneke in exchange for land holdings in California. Though August Fitger was no longer associated with the brewery, Percy Anneke decided to keep Fitger’s in the company name. In 1938, August



Figure 2: Historic Interior of Fitger's. Photo courtesy of Fitger's Inn.

Fitger’s grandson, Arnold Fitger, purchased the operating brewery from Percy Anneke’s son Victor’s estate. From 1938 until the brewery closed in 1972, the brewery remained in the hands of the Fitger Brewing Company – though the company did change presidents and management over the years. When the brewery stopped production on September 30, 1972, John A. Ferris was President of the Fitger Brewing Company.

³ C. W. Nelson, *Fitger’s Brewery Site Survey*, March 11, 1974, located in the Fitger’s Brewery file, St. Louis County Resources File, Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

⁴ *Fitger’s Brewery National Register of Historic Places Nomination*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

The biggest change that occurred to the Fitger Brewery during its operation was a shift in production from beer to soda pop and candies during Prohibition from 1919 to 1933. The change in production allowed the Fitger Brewery to remain a viable company while still operating within



Figure 3: Historic Fitger's Bottling Department. Photo Courtesy of Fitger's Inn.

complex were demolished prior to 1984.⁹

the law. Following the repeal of the Prohibition Act on December 5, 1933, Fitger's shifted their production lines back to brewing beer. Architectural alterations did occur occasionally between 1920 and 1964, as needed to maintain or update the processes within the complex and to accommodate changes in the company's size.⁸ Overall, the brewery remained an intact complex following the 1886-1911 building program, though four buildings in the

3. Closure of the Brewery

On September 30, 1972, John A. Ferris, then President of The Fitger Brewing Company, chose to close the historic complex in favor of constructing a new warehouse facility built at the Duluth Airport Industrial Park. Ferris' decision to close the historic brewery was a two part decision in reaction to larger state government actions. The first part of the equation was a 1972 "stipulation agreement with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (PCA), that called for the brewery 'either to complete an expensive pollution abatement project or close down... not later than September 30.'"¹⁰ Ferris chose to close the brewery rather than make the alterations because in November 1970, the Minnesota Department of Highways released their finalized plans for the northern terminus of Interstate 35 in Duluth. The 1970 plan for Interstate 35 called for the railroads between downtown Duluth and Lake Superior to be relocated and the interstate to be

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Fitger's Brewery to close September 30," *Duluth New Tribune*, September 29, 1972, 16, available on microfilm at the Minnesota Historical Society Library, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

erected on the former railroad right-of-way. This plan required that the interstate be elevated 20 feet into the air on concrete columns in order to limit the effect of spray off of Lake Superior on traffic. Additionally, a large concrete seawall was proposed to line the elevated interstate in an effort to further protect traffic from the spray. The plan also required the demolition of numerous built and cultural resources along the proposed right-of-way, including the brewery – making the alterations required by the Minnesota PCA a waste of money in Ferris’ eyes.

4. Advocacy

Almost immediately after the November 1970 announcement for the extension of Interstate 35, a community action group, Citizens for the Integration of Highway and Environment (CIHE), was formed to try to amend the proposed route. CIHE and local individuals did not agree with the Minnesota Department of Highways statement that the interstate would help to remove the blighted rail yard, warehouses, and rubble from the lakefront. Rather, CIHE stood up against the proposed route telling the Department of Highways that the traditional practice of “ignoring social and environmental impact in the name of cost-effectiveness and better traffic flow would not be tolerated in Duluth.”¹¹ In 1972, another community action group, Stop the Freeway, was formed. Stop the Freeway’s goal was to completely prevent the construction of the interstate, as members argued that since Duluth was the northern terminus for Interstate 35, there was no reason that the road had to end north of the city. Because of the ongoing debates about where and how the interstate should be constructed, the former Fitger’s Brewery, along with many other properties along the proposed route, sat in a state of limbo – with people wishing to save the properties, but no one willing to invest in a project that may be torn down in a few years to build a major interstate.

On Tuesday October 9, 1973 a public meeting was held in Duluth to discuss the interstate’s extension. Approximately 1,100 local residents attended this meeting. Feelings about the interstate’s construction were split. Some parties, including Stop the Freeway, wished that the extension would be abandoned. Others saw a real need for the extension in order to alleviate traffic issues along Second Street, where Interstate 35 was funneling 30,000 cars per day into

¹¹ Thomas B. Gray, “Chapter Four: I-35 through Duluth,” *The Aesthetic Condition of the Urban Freeway*, <http://www.mindspring.com/~tbgray/prch4.htm>.

downtown.¹² Additional proposals for the routing of the interstate were looked at, but nothing was effective or garnered a majority of the public's support. In 1975, the city of Duluth created the Citizens Advisory Committee to work with the now Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHA) to find a solution to the issue. Through the discussions between all three groups and the general public, residents of Duluth became increasingly aware of the historic and natural resources along the lakefront and the importance of protecting the area as much as possible. The resulting proposal from the Citizens Advisory Committee's work with Mn/DOT and the FHA was to build the interstate in a "cut and cover" manner. Meaning, the interstate would be dug into the ground, and a series of "lids" would be constructed to protect the road from the elements, and to provide public spaces and links from downtown to the lakefront. The proposal was presented and approved in the fall of 1977, though construction did not begin until 1982.¹³ Once the extension was finalized and construction began, interest in developing the now saved properties along the lakefront, including Fitger's, began to grow.

5. Rehabilitation

On October 13, 1982, over 10 years after John A. Ferris closed the historic brewery, Ronald J. Jacob purchased the complex from the Fitger Brewing Company for \$800,000. Ronald was a general partner with Jack Helms in the newly formed Brewery Corporation. Ronald and Jack wished to rehabilitate the brewery into a multi-use facility that would accommodate tourists and local residents. In the summer



Figure 4: Fitger's Complex viewed from Lake Superior. Photo courtesy of Fitger's Inn.

of 1983, the property was transferred from The Brewery Corporation to Brewery Limited Partnership. Brewery Limited Partnership planned to turn the complex into a mixed use

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

destination with a 47 room inn, three restaurants, a 30 shop retail arcade, a multi-media theater, a small brewery, a museum, and office rental spaces. The proposed development was estimated to



Figure 5: Fitger's Complex as viewed from Duluth.
Photo courtesy of Fitger's Inn.

cost \$9.5 million, create 100-130 construction jobs and 250 long term jobs.¹⁴

Due to several reasons, construction on the development did not actually begin until January 1984. First, the project continued to grow in estimated cost, reaching a projected \$11.8. This meant that before construction began, additional funding, had to be secured. An agreement was struck with the City of Duluth for the sale of \$6.35 million in Industrial Revenue Bonds in early

January 1984.¹⁵

Secondly, because a portion of the funding for the project was coming from the City of Duluth (in the form of industrial revenue bonds), a Section 106 review (as stipulated by the National Preservation Act of 1966) was triggered. The Section 106 review concluded with a memorandum of agreement between the city of Duluth, the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, and the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation. The memorandum stated - that the City of Duluth must ensure that the rehabilitation followed the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and that the State Historic Preservation Office would review the rehabilitation of the brewery. The agreement also stated that the City of Duluth would ensure documentation of the stable and garage would occur prior to demolition.¹⁶

The rehabilitation of the former brewery was completed in September 1984, at a reported cost of \$12.6 million. When it opened, the Fitger's complex featured a 48 room hotel developed

¹⁴ Brewery Limited Partnership, *Project Fact Sheet* (Duluth: Interoffice Memo, 1983), located in the Fitger's Brewery file, St. Louis County Resources File, Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

¹⁵ "Construction to begin on Duluth brewery," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, January 5, 1984, clipping located in the Fitger's Brewery file, St. Louis County Resources File, Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

¹⁶ Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, City of Duluth, and Advisory Council for Historic Preservation, *Memorandum of Agreement: Fitger's Brewery*, 1984, located in the Fitger's Brewery file, St. Louis County Resources File, Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

by Historic Inns of America, two restaurants, and a retail arcade.¹⁷ The rehabilitation of the former brewery was honored in the fall of 1985 at the first annual Preservation Alliance of Minnesota Preservation Awards, where the project received one of five “Brick and Mortar Awards.”

6. Rehabilitation 2.0

In 1994, a group of local businessmen and women, Scott Vesterstein, Paul Vesterstein, Joy Vesterstein, Vlasie Solon, Ron Johnson, Jack Thomas, John Ethen, and Ron and Mary Ann Weber purchased the Fitger’s complex. Scott Vesterstein had been involved with the Fitger’s property since it’s opening in 1985, as the owner of United Colors of Bennetton – one of the shops in the complex.¹⁸ Upon purchasing the complex, the new owners began planning for a second rehabilitation of the brewery to expand the hotel and improve the guest’s experience on the property. Additionally, the owners planned to address the overall condition of the complex, as it suffered from years of limited maintenance. The rehabilitation that the new owners planned was not a “one-time redo.” Rather, they planned a series of long term goals and projects intended to improve visitor experiences while maintaining and preserving the historic brewery.¹⁹

Because much of the rehabilitation work done at Fitger’s under the current owners has been long term in nature, funding for the work has primarily come from within the company – either through owner investment, loans, or from the complex’s income. A majority of the work that has been completed on the Fitger’s property since 1994 has been done by a team hired by Fitger’s whose sole job is to complete the various preservation and rehabilitation projects within the complex. Owner’s Ron Johnson and Jack Thomas have also been extensively involved with the work at the former brewery – Ron has served as general contractor for the 1994 update and expansion of the hotel rooms, and Jack has been the primary architect for all of the recent projects.²⁰

¹⁷ Fitger’s Management, “Welcome to Fitger’s: History,” Fitger’s Brewery, <http://www.fitgers.com/subpage.php?page=History>.

¹⁸ Scott Vesterstein, telephone interview by author, St. Paul, MN, July 27, 2009.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Updating the Fitger's Inn was the first major undertaking by the new owners. The goal of the project was to become the only American Automobile Association (AAA) ranked Four Diamond accommodation in Minnesota, north of the Twin Cities.²¹ Construction on the guest rooms began in 1994 and each of the guest rooms was designed to have its own style and details.²² Twelve new guest rooms were also created between 1994 and 1995. An additional 2 suites in 2000 – bringing the total number of rooms to 62. In 2007, a second renovation of the hotel rooms saw the replacement of all the guest beds, and included the installation of new carpeting new wall coverings, and furnishing. Additionally, new lighting was installed throughout the entire hotel.²³

In conjunction with improving the guest rooms at Fitger's, the owners placed a large emphasis on preserving many of the complex's unique exterior features. This included a 1997 restoration of the complex's water tower, the restoration of a historic smoke stack, and ongoing roof



Figure 6: Rehabilitated lobby of Fitger's Inn. Photo courtesy of Fitger's Inn.

and parapet wall maintenance.²⁴ One of the largest projects on the exterior of the complex has been the retuck-pointing of the south wall, which began in 2001. The historic Chicago Brick south wall had been repaired in the past with a cement-based mortar, rather than a historically accurate lime-based mortar. The use of cement-based mortar caused a number of problems with the wall's stability, due to the extreme freeze-thaw cycles experienced in Duluth. The ongoing tuck-pointing project called for the replacement of the old mortar with a lime-based mortar that matches historic mortar's makeup. This project, in addition to being one of the largest projects in the complex, has also been one of the most challenging. Because of the noise created by the retuck-pointing, working hours are limited in order to intrude on guests as little as possible. The weather has also been a challenge, as work cannot be completed when it is too cold or if there is

²¹ Ibid.

²² Fitger's Management.

²³ Scott Vesterstein.

²⁴ Ibid.

too much moisture in the air. Finally, the project has been challenging because Fitger's has chosen to locate and use salvaged Chicago Bricks from other buildings constructed around the same time as Fitger's to give the wall a cohesive appearance.²⁵

The shopping arcade at Fitger's has received much needed upgrades. Since 2004, all of the 165,000 square feet of leasable space, as well as the public restrooms have been renovated. The upgraded spaces have created a multi-use facility that caters both to tourists and local residents. A public museum of the property's history, walking tours and yearly programming, including an annual reunion for former Fitger's employees, ensures the general public stays engaged with the property.

7. Conclusion

While pleased with the ongoing work and rehabilitation of the brewery complex, Fitger's Management has many dreams for the future. Work to be completed includes completing the retuck-pointing of the east wall, staying current with major maintenance projects, periodically updating the various guest facilities to insure guest comfort, and focusing on energy efficiency in both guest services and future improvements. As of the summer of 2009, Fitger's has begun a green program that includes a recycling program and switching to environmentally friendly cleaning products. Fitger's management is also exploring becoming a LEED certified facility under the LEED for Existing Buildings Rating System.²⁶

The Fitger's complex in Duluth, MN is an excellent example of how private investors can utilize public funding to rehabilitate important local landmarks. Fitger's also demonstrates that planning and completing routine maintenance is crucial for the long term success of any rehabilitation project. The new commitment by the current management at Fitger's to introduce environmentally friendly practices to the operation and rehabilitation of the property, showcases that new technology and thinking can be successfully integrated into historic properties while still maintaining the property's historic integrity.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Appendix 1: Table of Advocates

| Organization/Company Name | Advocate Name and Contact | Advocacy Role |
|---|---|---|
| Citizens for the Integration of Highway and Environment | Name: A: Ph: E: | Opposed the 1970 proposal for I 35 Extension into Duluth |
| Stop the Freeway | | 1972 community action group to prevent the I 35 extension |
| Citizens Advisory Committee | | Worked with Mn/DOT and FHA on revised I 35 extension plan |
| The Brewery Corporation | | Owners of the property in 1982 |
| | Names: Scott Vesterstein, Paul Vesterstein, Joy Vesterstein, Vlasie Solon, Ron Johnson, Jack Thomas, John Ethen, and Ron and Mary Ann Weber A: 600 East Superior Street / Duluth, MN 55802 Ph: 218.722.8826 E: fitgers@fitgers.com | Current owners of Fitger's Inn |

Appendix 2: Table of Known Funding

| Funding Name and Contact | Type of Funding | Funding Amount | Year |
|---|--------------------------|----------------|------|
| City of Duluth | Industrial Revenue Bonds | \$6.35 million | 1984 |
| | | | |
| All funding for current projects has come from internal sources | Internal | - | - |

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