

Rehab/Renovation Winner
WXPB/World Cafe Live
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By Tim Hyland

On a recent humid Friday afternoon, legendary bluesman Buddy Guy rolled into Philadelphia and set up shop in a former plumbing supply warehouse on the outskirts of University City.

He plugged in, tuned up and put on a show that 600 music-loving Philadelphians will probably never forget.

It's days like that one, when his radio station is able to play the role of ultimate party host, that Roger LaMay is reminded just how important WXPB's new home really is: Important for the station, important for his listeners, and important for all of Philadelphia.

"It's been great for the staff, it's been great for the artists, and most of all, it's been great for our listeners," said LaMay, general manager of WXPB, the nationally lauded nonprofit radio station of the University of Pennsylvania. "We just had 600 people in here to see Buddy Guy. We were able to broadcast it live. And that's only possible because of the building."

A couple of years ago, the building at 3025 Walnut St. was an empty, beaten eyesore -- a former industrial site called the Hajoca Building. Now, after an extensive and impressive renovation, the building may be the most significant musical development in Philadelphia in years.

Home to both WXPB and for-profit music venue/bar/restaurant World Café Live, owned and operated by Real Entertainment, the Hajoca Building today serves as an artistic gateway to University City -- and could prove to be a major driver in the development of the entire neighborhood.

"What's really been beyond my expectations are the moments we've already enjoyed in the first year, when the building is running on all cylinders," said Hal Real, founder and president of Real Entertainment, which owns and manages World Cafe Live. "It's like, 'Wow, this is exactly what we envisioned.'"

When Dranoff Properties acquired the building by means of a long-term ground lease with Penn, the building had plenty of potential, but little else. Built in 1921, it had sat vacant for decades, but officials at Dranoff and Penn saw bigger things in the building's future.

WXPB had been looking for a new home for years, but only when investors, Dranoff included, began building up the blocks directly east of Penn's campus did the Hajoca Building begin to stand out. At one point, Philadelphia Magazine appeared to be ready to

move in, but that deal fell through. WXPN and World Cafe Live took advantage of the opportunity.

"There had been discussions about moving for years," LaMay said. "Everyone apparently said they took one look, saw the physical size of the location of the building, and realized it had enormous potential."

Of course, that potential took \$15 million to be realized.

The rehab required 130,000 linear feet of metal studs, 280,000 square feet of drywall, 100,000 square feet of insulation, 900 cubic yards of concrete and 50 tons of steel. Everything from windows and doors to glass and masonry needed to be restored. Architects also faced the challenge of designing an interior space suitable for two clients with a shared mission, bringing music people, with separate day-to-day operations and ownership groups, together. WXPN and World Cafe Live share a building, but they are not related.

Planners solved the problem by dividing the space vertically. World Cafe Live fills a 150-seat bar and restaurant on the building's upper floor, which actually is at street-level with Walnut Street (which is above ground along that section), and has a 350-seat music hall on the lower level. The lower level is also where the WXPN studios are located.

"I'd say it's even better than what we'd hoped for," Real said. "The physicality and the practicality, and the spiritual and aesthetic synergy, of trying to have two separate users who have things going on together has really worked out really well."

For WXPN, the building has improved nearly every facet of the station's day-to-day operations. Previously, the station was split between two buildings. On-air personalities were in one building, support staff in another, and logistics and communications problems resulted. Inside the old radio studio -- a historic home on the Penn campus that had its charms, but was not quite adequate for modern radio -- it was not uncommon for squirrels or pigeons to intrude on recording sessions.

Bands visiting the station lugged their gear up three floors, and performed in a cramped space just barely big enough to work. Station staff covered the walls with record albums, not for ambiance, but because they helped with sound buffering.

"Despite the fact that we have a radio program that is broadcast on 190 stations across the country, we had pretty antiquated facilities," LaMay said.

The building, emblazoned with a massive neon sign announcing the station's call letters, also gives WXPN a visibility it's never before had. That visibility comes in especially handy when, on one of those great radio days, somebody like Buddy Guy decides to play in University City.

"That's one of the things we think is very important -- we now have this big building with a big red neon sign near the [Schuylkill Expressway] and Amtrak," LaMay said. "Now people can say, 'There's my radio station.' It's an important thing for the station to be visible and accessible."

Real said the visibility challenge for World Cafe Live is even larger.

Though investors are pouring millions into blocks surrounding the site, the question, Real said, will be how many more residents and visitors a revived University City will funnel toward his venue. He's hoping the answer is very, very many.

"We're counting on it," Real said. "Today, we are the hole in the doughnut. Eventually, provided we survive, we'll be the cream of the doughnut. Today, nobody comes to World Cafe Live unless they're coming to World Cafe Live. That's a big challenge for us."