

ARCHITECTURE: REVIEW

A smart-growth pioneer arises

Renovating the Stewart's/Caldor York Road property is an exercise in innovation.

By EDWARD GUNTS
SUN ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

Stewart's department store was an architectural pioneer when it opened on York Road in 1955. It was part of an early wave of downtown-based retailers venturing into the counties. It anchored a shopping center that contained such one-time Baltimore mainstays as Hamburger's, Peck and Peck and Silber's Bake Shop. Its exterior and site plan were the work of the noted industrial designer Raymond Loewy.

Now the Stewart's property has a chance to be a pioneer all over again, this time as an example of environmentally sensitive development and "Smart Growth" principles. Its conversion to offices for Baltimore County and the state of Maryland, now under way, will improve the appearance of a key stretch of York Road and help revitalize the surrounding area.

In an age when shifting shopping patterns are rendering some retail operations obsolete, it's a timely reminder that there's more than one way to skin a department store.

The conversion was launched earlier this year to house employees from Towson's Investment Building, the 13-story structure

where workers have complained of health problems they believe are caused by poor indoor air quality and lax maintenance.

After considering four possible locations, state and county officials selected the former Stewart's property at 6401 York Road as the place to move approximately 1,000 office workers. After renovations are completed by a private group, the county will acquire the building for \$19 million.

The decision showed foresight because the Stewart's property has a 45-year history as a location for shopping, not offices.

A modern Main Street

As the first of five suburban outlets for Stewart & Co., whose downtown flagship stood at Howard and Lexington streets, it was quite an attraction in its day. It boasted the largest display of home furnishings on one floor in the Baltimore area, "escalators to whisk you from one level to another," and intricate seed mosaics by artist Carl Mann. "Here is the convenience of Main Street in a suburban setting," cooed the opening day ad.

After Stewart's closed in 1983 — the last store in the chain to do so — the building was converted to a branch of Caldor, which billed itself as the Bloomingdale's of discounting. But Caldor shut down in 1999, and the site has been dormant ever since.

The owners might have found another retailer to take Caldor's place. But the shopping industry is such that big-box retailers like to be near each other, and the 10-acre Anneslie Shopping Center lacks room for more than one.

Converting the store to offices

makes sense because it helps fill a vacant building in a prominent location and brings in office workers who will patronize shops up and down York Road. The property has ample free parking and easy access from several directions. The structure is sturdy and floor-to-ceiling heights are more generous than they are for most office buildings.

Baltimore County Executive C. A. Dutch Ruppersberger said he originally thought of moving office workers from the Investment Building to the former Caldor in Timonium, because it's near the state's light rail line. But when it turned out there wasn't sufficient parking near the Timonium building, he said, officials explored other county locations and decided the former Caldor in Anneslie was the best.

The building is two miles south of Towson, well-served by public transportation, and has decked parking in the rear, Ruppersberger noted. Because it's just north of the city-county line, he said, the influx of employees will help merchants and businesses in both jurisdictions. "It's going to make a big difference."

The renovation will also remove an eyesore from York Road. Although the Stewart's building was innovative for its time — designed to be a full-service department store, not a branch — it wasn't much to look at. Despite the connection to Loewy (who also designed Stewart's Reisterstown Road store), it was essentially a windowless box with white brick, stone and slate accents, and colored awnings. It didn't have the gentle curves of the Hutzler's

building in Towson or the glass corner of the Hochschild-Kohn at York and Belvedere. The conversion to Caldor, with metal panels on the side and a blocky corner entry, made it look worse. Boarded up, it was even uglier.

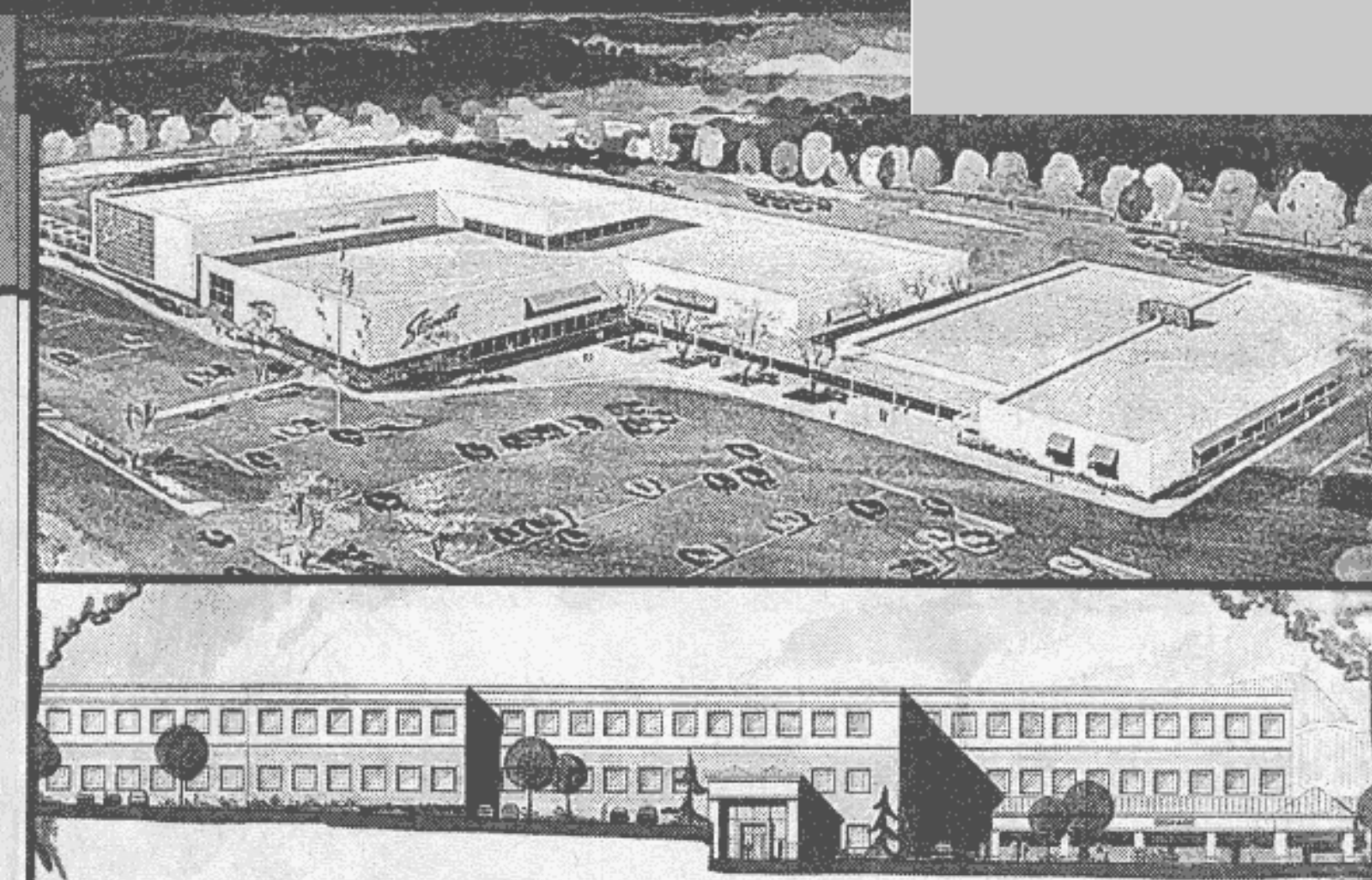
The developer is 6401 York Road Associates LLC, a local group headed by Larry Boltansky. The architect is Fishman Curry and Associates of Owings Mills, and Proutt Construction is the construction manager.

Boltansky said he read about the Investment Building's troubles in the newspaper, drove up and down York Road looking for an alternative site, got the Caldor building under contract, and let state officials know it was available for conversion in the event they decide to relocate employees. He said he didn't think it would attract another major retailer because the interiors weren't designed for today's businesses.

"What was there was circa 1955," he said. "Retailing today is done in a different fashion. We believe converting it to a state of the art office building is a great alternative. It will be a plus for the south York Road corridor, and it really falls in line with the state's Smart Growth initiative."

Using the skeleton

To prepare the building for its new occupants, team members decided to strip it down to its concrete skeleton and start over. Because the exterior walls weren't load-bearing, explained architect Shellie Curry, it was possible to remove them and the interior partitions without



SUN FILE (TOP); FISHMAN-CURRY & ASSOCIATES (BELOW)

Ahead of the times: Top, the old Stewart's; below, a rendering of the county office building that is being built in the same spot.

weakening the building's structure.

The new exterior will be a combination of artificial stucco walls — made with a material known as EIFS, which stands for Exterior Insulation and Finish System — and large square windows. The walls will be cream-colored on the first and second levels and white above, with a heavy cornice at the top. Architectural details will be somewhat traditional in feel.

It might have been preferable to see brick walls. But this is a straightforward, cost-efficient solution that expresses the new use, marks the entrances clearly, lets plenty of natural light into the work areas, and can be completed quickly.

The changes are more than skin deep. Conscious of concerns about air quality in the Investment Building, the developers are installing new mechanical systems for heating, ventilation and air conditioning, as well as a new roof. They're

also working with the state to make this a "green" building, incorporating the latest approaches to eco-sensitive design.

As part of the green initiative, the team is recycling 80 percent of the debris taken from the old store. In the reconstruction, they're using materials and strategies that conserve energy and don't deplete natural resources. For example, they're installing energy-efficient windows and using an open-plan office layout. And by working within the building's existing footprint, they didn't have to excavate any land.

In addition, "we get to use the best part of the old building — the structural columns and slab," Boltansky said. "It would be prohibitively expensive to build them today."

Tenants will include the state's Department of Human Resources and the county's Department of Social Services, Department of Health and Office of Community Conservation. Because those offices operate mainly during business hours on weekdays, employees aren't likely to congest York Road at nights or on weekends the way shoppers might if a store took Caldor's place. In a second phase of construction, the attached shopping strip will be renovated to be compatible with the offices, creating a true mixed-use center.

When the 178,000-square-foot building opens this fall, it will be hard to tell a department store ever stood on the property. That's not necessarily bad. This conversion shows there's another option for owners of vacant department stores in the suburbs, besides waiting for the next retail trend to come along. It provides a template for similar conversions in the future, and shows how a pro-active local government can be part of the solution.

In many ways, this is a better use for the property than another store, because it will bring hundreds of people to an area that has the infrastructure to accommodate them and needs their presence. It may not be "Main Street in a suburban setting." But it promises to be just as well-suited for its time as the Stewart's building was in 1955 — and just as beneficial to the surrounding community.