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Historic N.O. factory will become apartments

by The Associated Press

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The former Blue Plate Foods factory in New Orleans will be converted into 72 loft-style apartments with artists getting preference for leases.

Interior demolition has started with a target date for occupancy in March 2012.

The \$25 million project is being led by New Orleans developers HRI Properties and JCH Development.

The 99,000-square-foot building is on the National Register of Historic Places.

In addition to apartments, the conversion also will include gated parking, a multipurpose room and gallery space for exhibitions, a roof deck, an outdoor patio, a soundproof music rehearsal room, a fitness center and a business center.

Developers say renewable and sustainable design features will be incorporated into the renovation to reduce residents' utility costs and overall operating costs. Many of the artists expected to lease the apartments have low incomes.

Two one-story brick warehouses at the rear will be demolished and their bricks used to build a fence around the property.

"It will not only be a catalytic project for the neighborhood and surrounding communities, but will also return the Blue Plate sign to lights," said lead developer Tara Hernandez, president of JCH Development.

The building was constructed in 1941 for the mayonnaise and sauce manufacturer Blue Plate Food Inc. It was designed by architect August Perez in the art modern style, similar to art deco known for its curving forms, long horizontal lines and streamlined appearance.

The Blue Plate building is familiar to generations of New Orleans residents for its smooth, all-white exterior, rounded glass-block corners and large rooftop sign, which will be modified to read "Blue Plate Lofts."

Blue Plate Mayonnaise was one of the first commercially prepared mayonnaise products in the country and for years was one of the South's best-selling products.

Mayonnaise production at the site ended in early 2000 when Reily Foods Co. consolidated operations at a more modern plant in Knoxville, Tenn. Reily had bought Blue Plate Foods and the building in 1974 from Hunt-Wesson Co.

New Orleans businessman and investor Kevin Kelly bought the Blue Plate site from Reily in 2007 for \$1.875 million. In early 2010, he sold it to Hernandez and HRI for \$3.3 million.

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