

The Duck & Bunny and the Little Pink House

As anticipated, there is a lot of blow back from the razing of 312 Wickenden Street, which I feel compelled to address. While I am no longer co-owner of The Duck & Bunny, or the property that housed the restaurant for nearly a decade, having been a partner in its creation and its designer, I still have a strong attachment to its legacy.

Having read pieces in Rhode Island Monthly, network websites, and multiple blog posts by claimed architecture expert, David Brussat, I hope to solve the mystery he purports exists about the fate of the building. Especially since only WJAR managed to speak directly with Daniel Becker, the owner, prior to writing their initial pieces, there are a number of speculations and inaccuracies I'd like to clarify.

The History

I've told this story dozens of times over the years to both press and customers, but it feels appropriate to reestablish why The Duck & Bunny was housed at 312 to begin with, along with its origins. My former partner, Daniel Becker, and I had lived in NYC for years, always admiring the unique establishments housed in non-traditional commercial settings, like Bar Centrale in the theater district. We daydreamed of having our own place—his dream of opening a bar with friends having fell through; me having abandoned my vision of owning a tea shop after 9/11.

Prior to any whisper of a move from NYC, we often visited Dan's parents, on Providence's East Side, where Dan grew up. Our first trip included the tour: strolling Benefit street to admire the old colonials, dining at Louis Fuller's on the edgy West Side, and along Wickenden, which Dan described as an artsy district, filled with galleries and antique shops. I fell in love with the city. On one such weekend, I saw an ad in the paper for the Providence Preservation Society walking tour, and immediately became a member. The tours became our tradition, both post and prior to moving to Providence.

When circumstances forced us to vacate our apartment in NY, on no more than a whim, we decided to move to Rhode Island and take a shot at making our dream a reality. Providence had everything I loved about NYC—art, culture, and great food, without the pollution and crowds. Its unique colonial charm drawing me in like an Austen novel, I abandoned the only home I'd known, friends, family and career, and moved to a city where I knew no one but my in-laws, whom we promptly moved in with in order to work on The Duck.

Faced with another failing economy, a coffee shop seemed the only type of establishment that may survive, though we introduced our own aspirations into the mix — afternoon tea and a small bar. Dan had wanted to call his bar in NY, The Duck & Bunny — a nod to the old taverns of Europe, but cute and innocuous enough to appeal to the every-man. Only two commercially zoned houses were available for rent in Providence, at the time. A not so charming building on Thayer Street that housed a bike repair shop/video store (which was eventually knocked down) and 312 Wickenden Street. We saw the building and promptly signed the lease. Already boasting a commercial kitchen, it was crooked and worn and perfect for a little coffee shop. And it was on Wickenden, which we loved.

The Duck & Bunny was born. We were excited and frightened and had no idea what we were doing. I remember panicking one night while binge watching the Food Network. "How are

we going to break even by selling coffee and cupcakes, never mind make a living??" But there was no turning back, nor did we want to. Trial by fire, and support from the community allowed us to thrive in a niche no one knew needed filling, as we were told by many customers. We were fortunate to be welcome with open arms by both fellow restaurant owners and patrons. It'd been auspicious to find a house, commercially zoned, in a great location. It was sheer, yup, providence. Throwing caution to the wind we offered what we loved— cupcakes, crepes, tea, cocktails. Everything served in real porcelain, in a European café setting, in lieu of the throw-away paper cup society the modern world had become. Barring TV, we wanted to provide escape, casting back to a simpler time, which thankfully, guests embraced. We continually evolved and thrived, despite the ups and downs of restaurant ownership, and are so grateful for the years of patronage our fans and loyal customers bestowed.

The Reality

That was The D & B mission. Now to the topic at hand. Let me preface by saying that when we walked into 312, besides the colonial façade and the crooked floors, there wasn't much to comment on. The house had three fireplaces, only one of which wasn't hazardous. We learned that the hard way, after filling the dining room with smoke much to the diners' chagrin. The Blue Elephant was housed in the space when we took over the lease. The walls, painted mint green, had costume jewelry tacked up on it, for sale. Plain white drapes adorned the windows and a coca-cola machine stood in the lounge, greeting customers with fluorescent light and commercialism. Beyond the fireplaces, and the little angels that resided above the hearth in what would become the bar room, there was no particular character to speak of, but it had potential.

With Dan's encouragement, I designed a bar and some quirky built-in banquettes. I added crown molding that housed cove lighting, painted the ceiling with "silver leaf," hung traditional English wallpaper, and added all of the picture frame molding in both the tearoom and lounge. Despite the ceiling height, I installed crystal chandeliers, low enough to bang more than a few heads, and sconces on the walls. Designed as a counter service establishment, the method did not stick with patrons. Servers were hired, but flow wasn't optimal. We made do in the small, cozy space, Dan finding the perfect word to describe it: a snugger.

There is a harsh reality to renting in an old building subject to the landlord's discretion. And while it isn't my intention to disparage, the property was a business investment for the previous owners, just as it would be for most. Jim Falcon, one of the previous owners, is quoted in Rhode Island Monthly's article about the demolition of 312 saying, "It's been such a big part of our family, [we] have cared for it for most of our lives and were reassured that the new owners would continue to preserve it." Let me just say, that it's very difficult to preserve something that had not been preserved, for so many decades.

If it rained, a deluge of water fell from the roof, soaking customers and deterring others who didn't desire a second shower. Stalactites of deadly icicles we feared would skewer a patron, adorned the roof every winter. It took years to get the landlord to invest in a solution other than a broomstick. The waterfalls never ceased. Subsequently, he convinced us to split the ten-thousand-dollar cost of a new roof under the presumption that we would be purchasing the building only to have it consistently leak into the second-floor tenant's bathroom

afterward, never rectified by the company he'd hired to do the job. We would not have invested so if we intended to raze the building.

When small repairs were needed, like a broken window or bulkhead, the landlord would pay if I asked. But there was no consistent work done to maintain the integrity of the structure, beyond the shoddy roof, in the decade we rented. If I didn't request it, it wasn't on the agenda. If I mentioned large ticket items, like the fact that the entire rear wing of the house had sunk below grade down to its rotting clapboard, or that we had floods in the basement every time it rained because the building desperately needed a new foundation, there were no efforts made to make expensive structural repairs. I had to pay for the fire box maintenance that's required by law in any commercial building, in order to keep tenants safe. There were renters on the second floor, exclusive of us, and the restaurant had to pay for its upkeep or be forced to close. No one from the city was policing any of this or holding the landowner responsible. No inspectors, no conservationist party. And the decay of the structure would have been clear to anyone who cared to look, no matter how much Prosecco they had consumed. The wear and tear did not happen overnight.

Dan was a realtor in NYC for years. Knowing the importance of owning the property in which your business is housed, to maintain control of its destiny, he negotiated right of first refusal when we signed the lease. At no point prior to purchase did we ever consider starting from scratch. We were told by contractors, and engineers alike, not to purchase the albatross that was 312 Wickenden. And frankly, I didn't want to. I saw the building's multitude of flaws. Flaws that would cost exorbitant amounts of money to rectify, due to its years of neglect. But we had to buy it—it was our business. It was our baby. And it was in a dilapidated old building by our own choosing.

After many delays, including the discovery that no certificate of occupancy was on file since 1992, we closed on the sale in 2018. I had already been working diligently on plans for the renovation. Unfortunately, our dreams for the place were dashed every time we tried to keep the existing structure. We debated, lamented, and tried six ways from Sunday to make it work, for months, but we always circled back to the same conclusion. It wasn't cost effective to try and salvage the structure.

Since the rear wing was sunk below grade, it had to be torn down. To try and jack it up to create a new foundation where there was nothing but crawl space, while still attached to the front wing of the house, would have compromised the structure further, putting more strain on an already aged building with a crumbling foundation. That meant replacing at least that wing, which housed the kitchen, which we simply wanted to expand. A certain percentage of renovations requires that everything be brought up to code in the entire structure. That meant adding ADA bathrooms, which while we very much wanted to be wheelchair accessible, they were certainly not common in a historic house of that scale. Our tiny bathroom could not be grandfathered in, nor should it be. We also needed to move its location so customers would no longer have to wait outdoors, exposed to the elements, or risk getting mowed down by a server holding three tiers of cupcakes for a turn in the lone water closet. Bringing electrical up to code, adding a sprinkler system and other upgrades meant it was a full gut--tearing up the walls and ceilings until it was unrecognizable. The HVAC system had always needed a complete overhaul. The low basement ceilings were causing concussions and the pipes froze due to a lack of insulation.

We were told it would have been significantly more work, and just as costly, to save what existed, which would have left us with a virtually brand-new building supported by a still crumbling foundation anyway. It made no sense.

The idea was to gain more space by making the second floor accessible to customers for dining and events. This was not possible with the current stair layout. More importantly, the kitchen needed repair and expansion. The size and layout couldn't keep up with the demand for snuggery cakes on Sunday mornings, but worse than that, there were giant holes forming in the old floors beneath the linoleum, and we were just waiting for the chefs to plummet into the basement in the midst of flipping crepes. We had to keep reassuring the staff that the patch job we had done would be replaced with a solid ground soon-- the question was, how? And the magic eight ball always came up with the same answer...rebuild.

This was not an easy decision. Far from it. There were many sleepless nights. Of course, we didn't want to tear down The Duck-- the old quirky house was part of its charm. But we also didn't want to sacrifice the structure's integrity, by continuing to put temporary bandages on everything, as had been done for so many years. Did you ever look up from your plate, your phone, the person across from you? The place was weathered and worn, and not in a good way. We may have created the smoke and mirrors to distract you from seeing these flaws, by drawing your eye to the VanBun on the wall, or tantalizing you with sweet cream cheese frosting, but let me tell you, they were there. And when you work in the same place everyday, you notice them in a way that a customer won't in the hour they're enjoying their meal.

David Brussat waxed poetic in his blog, *Architecture Here and There*, about The Duck's "highly classicized inside." I appreciate the compliment, as my guess is that the embellishments of moldings, and carved gilt framed art is what gave it its 'classicized' appeal. He also wrote, "The colonial housing The Duck was among the most pleasingly classical buildings on Wickenden, with an embellished doorway surround, a set of four wrought iron light fixtures, a slender entrance railing, a sign with duck and bunny silhouettes hung from an antique frame, and soft façade lighting at night, not to mention its pinkish hue." He failed to mention that embellished doorway surround had been so long neglected that it was rotted to its core, for the waterlogged reasons I mentioned above. Those "wrought iron" light fixtures are currently stored in my basement. If you like them, I think I bought them at Home Depot. I also installed the farmhouse façade lighting— you can purchase those online. I don't mean to sound flippant; I'm just being accurate. The railing was not old, but a safety necessity, installed at some point in the last 40 years, as clearly indicated in the lack of it in the photo he added to the blog post. I'd never seen this photo before, so I appreciate it being shared.



Let's take a good look at it, shall we? While the caption reads, *312 Wickenden Circa 1790, taken from the PPS archives*, I'd say this photo was taken around 1970. While we do believe the house was originally built in the 19th century, you can see from this photo that there is no clapboard on the façade, but a faux brick layout of some other shingle material. The windows do not depict the colonial panes they did when we resided there, and therefore while they certainly behaved as 200-year-old relics, they were clearly added sometime in the 1980s. There is no exterior lighting on the building here, because I added those fixtures, and the stairs and railing are quite different. No one had yet ruined the historic character by adding skylights to the front roof, in this photo either. Beyond the transom over the door and its lintels, which were likely in better shape when this photo was taken, nothing is the same about the façade of this house as it was in recent years. Someone added the clapboard and colonial windows, perhaps making it more reminiscent of its Halcyon days. However, one may be hard pressed to call its recent state historical, when historically, those elements weren't always present.

And let's not forget, the house was just that. A house. It was never meant to be a commercial space. I've met the lovely woman who grew up in that house. She was a patron and pointed out the location of her bedroom and where her Christmas tree was put up each year. I gave her cuttings of the white grape vine her father planted, that flourished over the fence between us and Wickenden Pub. And while that makes this story even sadder, it just proves that a house of that nature should never be turned into a commercial building to begin with, and The Duck was certainly not the first business or restaurant to grace it with hundreds of feet passing over its soft pine floors weekly, over decades.

And so, while it's a tragic shame leveling the building in order to keep the staff safe from the, let's call them "challenges," the old structure created, the difficult decision had to be made. It was neither the first choice, nor the easy one. I totally understand getting attached to houses--it's an affliction I've never been able to shake. It's why I do what I do for a living and have returned to my career in residential design under the new name "Burrow & Nest" because clearly, The Duck & Bunny will always be a part of me. And while I'm no longer in the restaurant business, it's also why I will continue to try and help aspiring restaurant owners design their spaces and concepts to create lasting businesses that patrons will love, because I believe those places should feel like a home away from home.

The Future

I will forever feel both proud of what Dan and I created and humbled by the positive response of our patrons and fans. People used to take photos of themselves inside The D & B, which always amazed me. They treated it like a wonder to behold, at times. A kind of fantasy land. And I hope, once the new building is erected, that I can help create that same atmosphere that was revered for almost ten years.

Will it be the same? Well, if you drop a nickel, will you lose it through the gaping cracks in the lounge floor to the basement? I don't think so. How about a cookie? Will it roll to the other side of the room at 45-degree angle? No more. Will you pinch your fingers opening the warped window, because it is so darn hot since the AC stinks? Nope. And you may actually get your breakfast within twenty minutes of sitting down, even though you were the last to be seated in a full house after doors opened at ten on a Sunday morning.

No, The Duck won't be the same, but it will be an evolved version of itself, designed with the care and comfort of the customers and staff in mind, to the best ability a 50-foot-wide structure will allow.

I will say this, in conflict of my own self-interest--while it is very important, atmosphere is not what makes the whole of a place. The Duck was a place where all kinds of folks came to unwind and enjoy life. Many first dates there ended up in marriages and baby showers, celebrated in the same space. Freshman entered to enjoy a cupcake and left by celebrating their graduation with their families in the tearoom. And as all things must pass, we held some lovely memorial services in the garden for loved ones. The Duck & Bunny was a rite of passage for so many, in a myriad of ways. However, it was not the worn floorboards beneath ones' feet that allowed lifelong connections to be made. Nor is it the illumination of a light fixture that makes memories. I like to think it was also the friendly faces of our dedicated employees that greeted and served the neighborhood regulars, and the food made with love by our chefs and pastry chefs. The execution of our vision was accomplished daily by our talented manager Ashley Gorman, and our Head Chef, Erik Anderson, who kept the place going with tireless effort and skill. And before I get maudlin, because no one will mourn The Duck & Bunny like our employees, Dan and I will, I will sign off with a cross stitch cliché: Home is where the heart is. And if you understood what The Duck & Bunny was all about, you'll come back once Dan rebuilds, and enjoy a cupcake.