

INSIDE BUSINESS

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COVER STORY

Metallic Wonder

Alcoa's expected sale of the landmark Reynolds Metals campus has some worried.

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In 1958, it was Richmond's claim to fame, featured in magazines and newspapers around the world. No, it wasn't a celebrity. It was a building called EXO, short for executive office building — the celebrated headquarters of Reynolds Metals Corp.

Designed by the famed architect Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore Owings & Merrill, the modern-style building and its classically landscaped campus were even loved by the Virginia Museum, whose curators called it the greatest building constructed in the state since Thomas Jefferson designed the State Capitol.

It seems the only person who didn't like the building was that other famous architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, who commented on the building's design during a speech at the University of Virginia: "If anything less Virginian could be imagined, I could not."

Built atop a hilly horse farm in what was once country on Broad Street Road, the Henrico headquarters was designed not only to be a beautiful building but as a massive sales display for aluminum. It was constructed with aluminum imbedded in everything from the curtains to the carpeting.

Desks, chairs and file cabinets were custom designed in aluminum for the building — even the inboxes on desks were custom aluminum creations. Slip into the bathrooms and you will see aluminum-faced bathroom tiles — all to show visitors the potential of the wonder metal of America, aluminum.

Today, however, EXO sits largely vacant, the result of the 1999 merger of Reynolds with its former rival, Alcoa Inc., which has headquarters in Pittsburgh.

While the company has announced that it will keep many ties to Richmond (advertising icons Pat and Betty and the company's test Reynolds Wrap kitchens will stay put in another building on the campus), the company officially put the building and headquarters complex on the market this winter for the reputed price of \$55 million.

Alcoa's deadline for reviewing bid proposals was April 30.

So far, little has been announced as to who may have won the famed campus, but rumors are flying about who is interested in the property.

Chuck Hansen, a spokesman for Alcoa in Richmond, says that 35 potential buyers were qualified for the purchase and given tours of the property, which includes a handful of buildings on a roughly 120-acre campus framed by Broad Street, Interstate 64 and Glenside Drive. According to county records, it is assessed at just under \$45 million.

Hansen does not know when the sale will be final.

"We are receiving multiple offers," says Hansen. "We cannot comment on a projected completion date."

Alcoa is said to have narrowed the search for a new owner down to a handful of finalists that includes Cousins Properties of Atlanta and William H. Goodwin Jr.'s CCA Industries Inc. Officials at Cousins and CCA, however, wouldn't comment.

Whatever happens to the building, many in the real estate community are watching with cautious optimism as similar modern-style corporate campus buildings throughout the country, including the headquarters building Bunshaft created for the Connecticut General insurance company near Hartford, have been threatened with destruction.

John Marlles, director of planning for Henrico County, hopes that high-quality office development in and around the campus can continue, though the county would consider mixed-use development in the area as well.

While there are no local regulations restricting redevelopment of the site, Marlles hopes the new owners will work closely with the county to encourage more high-end land uses in the area instead of another big-box retailer.

"It's a landmark building on Broad Street," says Marlles, who wants new structures on the site to echo the quality of the headquarters building. "We would like to see that continue."

Scholars and longtime supporters of the building hope that the redevelopment can become a model for Henrico.

"That Henrico County would recognize the significance of Reynolds is advanced to the point of being groundbreaking," says Mimi Sadler, an architect with Sadler & Whitehead who helped put the building on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ask New York University Professor Carol Herselle Krinsky about the Reynolds Metals headquarters campus in Richmond and there is a concerned pause.

"Is it threatened?" asks Krinsky, who authored the definitive book on the building's architect for the MIT Press.

Krinsky, who visited the complex in the 1980s when she wrote the Bunshaft book, says it should not be a surprise that developer-friendly Henrico County, not usually seen as aggressive in preservation issues, has embraced the building.

"They should love it," says Krinsky. "It is one of the best that America

was producing in those years.”

Bunshaft, a Buffalo-native who was trained at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, popularized the then-new “international style” with the design of New York’s Lever House, which was celebrated around the world for beginning the genre of modern-style skyscrapers. Some critics, like Richmond native Tom Wolfe, derided the structures as glass boxes for their glass curtain walls, but the idea still caught on.

The Reynolds headquarters campus was part of a new trend after World War II, when companies began moving out of the city. Krinsky says it was designed to be a total set piece, with transitions from street to front door to office that were intended to get employees into the business mode.

Bunshaft was a master architect who designed some of the most celebrated trophy headquarters buildings of the post-World War II era, including headquarters for IBM, Pepsico, Union Carbide, Chase Manhattan and W.R. Grace — unrivalled companies that were leaders when the rest of the world was in ruins.

“America became the business capital of the post-war era,” says Krinsky, who adds that Bunshaft also designed Philip Morris’ Richmond manufacturing plant. “It tells a lot about what America was.”

In spite of the intensely modern focus of the Reynolds building, it became hugely popular in Richmond for its design and the prestige it brought the city.

Krinsky says that today the building is an oddity in that modern buildings have for years been out of fashion. Recently, however, the modern look has begun to resurface.

“For a long time, people didn’t like things that looked like boxes,” says Krinsky.

The last and final Reynolds CEO to work in the building was Jeremiah Sheehan, who brokered the company’s sale to Alcoa. Sheehan, who has retired from the company but still lives in Richmond, says what struck him most was EXO’s rare solidity and beauty.

“A lot of corporate offices are in high-rises,” says Sheehan. “It was almost bucolic.”

Just before the company’s sale to Alcoa was finalized, Reynolds applied for the campus to be put on the National Register, a designation by the U.S. Department of the Interior that recognizes “exceptional significance in American architecture.”

Carolyn Burruss, an interior designer who worked for six years in Reynolds’ facilities department, says that part of the charm of the building is that it was always perfectly maintained by the company. Its true significance, however, wasn’t revealed until Reynolds started planning the building’s 40th anniversary in 1998.

Preparations for the re-enactment of the opening of the campus uncovered forgotten things about the building, she says, and helped make the case for its placement on the National Register, which was

finalized in April 2000. For instance, samples of the aluminum-laced carpeting, which were thought to be lost, were found.

Those sorts of discoveries indicated the amount of care that then company head Richard S. Reynolds Sr. helped put into the design of the building — everything from doorknobs to drawer pulls.

As the company went through the process of locating original aluminum pieces, employees again became aware that it was more than just a handsome office building. It made it onto the National Register even before it was 50 years old, which is normally a condition of eligibility.

"It's well sited and thoughtfully planned and stood the test of time," says Burruss. "You are reminded everywhere of the possibilities of aluminum."

Loth says that while the property was owned by Reynolds, some officials there had considered putting an easement on the property, which would have protected it prior to the company's sale to Alcoa.

Loth says that developing the site will be a challenge if the building is to be respected and function as a sort of trophy to attract other high-quality development on the site.

"Anything can be done," Loth says, adding that the National Register nomination was not only for Bunshaft's efforts, but also for the design work of popular Virginia landscape architect Charles Gillette, who supervised the grounds.

Sadler agrees that developing the site while keeping the integrity of the building and setting would be a challenge, but says it is not impossible because of the large amount of land in the parcel and the available tax credits.

"There's a real potential to do this, to have your cake and eat it too," says Sadler.

She says the biggest challenges are with the EXO building itself. The building, Sadler says, has a poor "net to gross," which means there's only a small amount of space available for lease because of the large lobby and courtyard.

"The building has vast public spaces — an open courtyard and linear reception area that are just huge," Sadler says. "It would have to be a headquarters, some entity that wanted a beautiful building."

She says the key would be to find a single tenant that could take advantage of the spaces in the building and not have to chop them up.

The site of the building also is part of the registry. In one way, that is an advantage. For in-stance, Sadler says that a large concentration of buildings could be constructed closer to the Glenside side of the property, or in the property's western quadrants. That kind of development would not affect the signature headquarters building, which would presumably be a centerpiece of the development.

"That leaves a pretty wide L-shaped lot that fronts on Glenside that would be developable," says Sadler.

The tax benefits can be considerable, Sadler says, because of the federal and state National Register nominations. Developers are eligible for tax credits on redevelopment costs of 20 percent from the federal government and 25 percent from the state. While Sadler says the federal credits are good, the state credits are even better, allowing not only construction costs but collateral costs, like site acquisition and ancillary fees.

Whatever happens to EXO, Alcoa intends to keep employees there in newer buildings. Richmond Alcoa spokesman Hansen says that there are about 2,100 Alcoa employees in the Richmond area, with about 650 employees at the Reynolds complex.

"We expect that the consumer-packaging business and other employees will remain here," Hansen says.

Krinsky admits that there will be challenges for the new owner. She says that in the era that Reynolds was built, multinational companies were much smaller. Today, companies believe that the best way to run a large company is to have "umpteen acres" of office space on one flat floor so that everyone can talk to each other.

Whatever the outcome of the sale, Loth hopes that the building can be seen as a lure to help attract other high-quality development on the property and not as a burden.

"It's a lovely classical building in a conspicuous, public location," says Loth. "It had a tremendous impact on Richmond business life. It set a very high standard. I hope that whoever buys it considers it a wonderful asset."

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