

Repurposing the rubble: University of Alabama salvages bricks from Bryce Hospital property

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

Published: Sunday, May 31, 2015 at 10:00 p.m.

Amid the brick rubble that was once the outward of historic Bryce Hospital's east wing, workers scrape old mortar from bricks with the claws of hammers.

The men clean the bricks — made by hand from local clays on the Bryce grounds more than 150 years ago — under tents made of black filter fabric and PVC frames to shield them from the rays of the late spring sun.

The bricks are lighter and coarser in texture than their modern counterparts. Some bear the indentions left by fingers pressed into wet clay so long ago.

"There are probably no two bricks alike," said Tim Leopard, assistant vice president for construction at the University of Alabama.

The university hopes to salvage about 275,000 bricks during demolitions on the historic property for future reuse.

The university is demolishing sections of the north, east and west wings of the main Bryce building as part of a \$20 million stabilization of the historic main structure in preparation for its use as a welcome and cultural center, museum, and facility for UA's department of theatre and dance.

The salvage of materials — for historic value or simply for reuse — is a regular part of demolition and construction on campus, Leopard said.

The reuse of the materials — everything from bricks to plants — is part of the university's sustainability efforts, he said.

"The opportunity to reuse the Bryce brick is a pretty special opportunity, and we are taking advantage of it," Leopard said.

The university is still considering uses for the brick, he said.

The university looks for materials that are historic, match the exteriors of other nearby buildings, or which might be useful in the future, said Mike Spooner, UA's building envelope manager.

"Things most people wouldn't have seen value in, I see value in ..." Spooner said.

Spooner provides field observation and planning review for new construction projects as well as supervising building maintenance such as repairs restorations.

Examples of the reuse of materials are scattered across campus.



Staff photo | Erin Nelson

Rigoberto Illescas uses a hammer to scrape off any remaining mortar on the bricks salvaged by the University of Alabama from the former East Wing of Bryce Hospital, originally built in 1853-61.

The cisterns at Marrs Spring were built with brick from a 1950-era fence that once stood in front of the Gorgas House. Plants and trees at the park were also reused from other sites on campus.

The posts from the chain-link fence that once surrounded the Bryce grounds while it still operated as a state hospital were refashioned into the bollards that now border the Bryce lawn, Leopard said.

The East Quad Energy Station between Gordon Palmer and Russell halls was built with brick salvaged from four old dormitories demolished in 2010.

In addition to saving money on construction material, reusing bricks allows newer structures to blend with the existing construction, Spooner said.

As the manufacturing processes and raw materials change, so do the bricks, Spooner said. Bricks change from batch to batch, making it hard to get modern bricks to match the colors of existing work exactly.

“As facility professionals, we have a duty first and foremost to support the university mission ...” Leopard said. “At a campus as special as the University of Alabama, I think we also have an implied mission to maintain the architectural and historical integrity of the campus.”

The university’s goal is to preserve as much as possible, Leopard said.

The older buildings have

a special attraction for Spooner, a mason for more than 40 years whose enthusiasm for his craft creeps into his voice as he explains the history of different styles of bricks on campus.

In the brickwork, Spooner reads the craftsmanship, technological challenges or the era and history.

“You can tell the history of the university in the growth of the architecture,” he said.

Reach Ed Enoch at ed.enoch@tuscaloosaneews.com or 205-722-0209.

Copyright © 2015 TuscaloosaNews.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.