

# New Life for a Decrepit Building

The Fifth Street structure has decayed in 20-plus years of disuse, but the Rice Fergus Miller firm sees possibilities.

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## BREMERTON

There would be no reason to give a second look to this empty and faceless building on Fifth Street.

Its windows sheathed since the 1980s, the former Sears automotive and appliance building is an anonymous box, a fading reminder of the mass retail exodus spurred by Silverdale's Kitsap Mall more than 20 years ago.

But a local architectural firm sees this bare box as a clean canvas on which to paint a dream for their new headquarters.

## ON THE WEB



For a video tour of the future home of Rice Fergus Miller Architecture & Planning, read this story online at kitsapsun.com.



LARRY STEAGALL | KITSAP SUN

Steve Rice of Rice Fergus Miller Architecture & Planning in Bremerton looks over the loft in the former Sears annex building on Fifth Street in Bremerton. The firm has purchased the building and plans to move into it after completing an extensive remodel.

As soon as next year, Rice Fergus Miller Architecture & Planning of Bremerton will undertake a complete gutting and remodeling of this cavernous space. When the \$3.5 million project is accomplished, partners Steven Rice, David Fergus and Michael Miller will have created a tailor-made home for their sta-

ble of architects.

Space will be left over for retailers — a coffee shop or restaurant, perhaps — and for community events.

Their work will fulfill

a deep resolve to make something old new again, to honor architectural history, and to be a part of downtown revitalization.

SEE ARCHITECTS | A3

**The firm outgrew its current space on Fourth Street a while ago, and leaders since have been looking at other downtown buildings they could re-invent, including the stately downtown post office. But in the end, they purchased the old Sears annex ...**



LARRY STEAGALL | KITSAP SUN

Steve Rice of Rice Fergus Miller Architecture & Planning in Bremerton looks over the decaying ceiling in the former Sears annex building on Fifth Street in Bremerton.

## ARCHITECTS | Site 'Like a Lab for Us'

### FROM A1

"We want to be part of an urban fabric," Rice said.

The 20,000-square-foot building is remembered by some as the Sears annex, and is connected by an alley bridgeway to the former Sears & Roebuck department store on Fourth Street. It is at 257 Fifth St., across from the Norm Dicks Government Center.

Inside, time has taken an unrelenting toll.

Rotting floors prop up a chilling and dark cold. Old signs direct ghost shoppers to the appliance corner in this once-bustling space. Chalk-white pigeon droppings encomb an upper floor.

But the architects point to possibility.

Beneath the sheathing and also exposed in back and to the sides are tall, high windows — lots of them. They are too decrepit to be saved, but the architects will have them replaced to allow natural light to flood the building's two stories and

mezzanine.

Far out of sight from passers-by on the very top of the building is an unusual skylight running almost its entire length. Sunlight steams through its horizontal twin bank of windows, shining more on what is to come here.

This signature skylight, what the architects call a "clear story," will be saved.

Under that clear story, the firm's three dozen staffers will work. They'll use ample space downstairs for client demonstrations — for instance using gurneys, cabinets and false walls to create a mock-up of a hospital emergency room.

"This allows us to demonstrate our creativity," Fergus said.

Miller called the building "somewhat like a lab for us."

The architects plan to build on designs in this 1948 building that were well before their time. Then, the windows were used not just for free light, but for natural climate control. The architects envision

interior space calibrated so finely that employees' body heat — maybe sweaters — would be all that was needed in winter.

The firm is aiming for certification under the LEED — Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design — rating system.

Rice founded the company in 1987; today it generates fees of \$6 million each year. It has projects on both sides of Puget Sound and specializes in facilities for health care, senior housing, emergency services and community projects.

The firm outgrew its current space on Fourth Street a while ago, and leaders since have been looking at other downtown buildings they could reinvent, including the stately downtown post office.

But in the end, they purchased the old Sears annex from a group of five Kitsap residents.

Because, as Miller said, that building, "unless somebody is going to move into it, is going to sit empty."