Architecture Around Us
By Lu Donnelly

Regional Breweries

Recent field work in 33 Western Pennsylvania counties has revealed several large, under-used and threatened brewery complexes. Such buildings, often from the late 19th century, can still be found in Oil City, DuBois, Millvale, and Pittsburgh. (Those in Erie will be discussed in another column.) Others are surely out there unrecognized by casual viewers.

Breweries were often the focal point of their communities, and those remaining epitomize their industrial and social eras. In the late 19th century, any large brewery complex worth its suds required numerous outbuildings and related services. Most common:

- an ice pond (pre-refrigeration) and ice house
- a malt house
- hop room
- sugar storage
- brewhouse
- fermenting room
- storage cellar
- a cooperage to make barrels
- stables for the dray horses
- vehicle sheds
- maintenance shops
- bottling store
- power plants
- offices
- often an owner’s mansion

Architects who designed breweries needed an understanding of both brewing and engineering, and due to their specialization, they were nearly itinerants, traveling around the country to brewery jobs.

Pittsburgh is considered a microcosm of the brewing industry. Initially, English settlers in the region made ale, but found whiskey to be more profitable. It was the introduction of German lagers in the 1840s which were less alcoholic and more effervescent that caused local breweries to proliferate and exceed simply meeting the needs of German immigrants. The growing popularity of lagers necessitated home delivery and increased capacity. Pasteurization, refrigeration, and Prohibition also caused major changes, and as a result, this area has dozens of former brewery buildings ripe for re-use.

The most recent casualty of progress was the Beck/Elk Brewery in Kittanning, Armstrong County, founded around 1874. Its 1880s buildings were recognizable by their arches and corbelling and the six-story brew tower with round window. The complex was being used by the Continental Clay Company as a storehouse for bricks until this spring, when it was demolished.

In Oil City, Venango County, the Saltzmann Brewery at Union and Charlton streets appears abandoned but maintains much of its original ornamentation, including the two-story round arched windows and sturdy smokestack. The buildings date from 1903/1904 when the plant was rebuilt to accommodate refrigeration. The Saltzmann brothers hired Detroit architects Gustave A. Mueller and Richard Mildner to update their brewery.

The most beautiful brewery — and one facing demolition in July — is the 1895 DuBois Brewery in DuBois, Clearfield County. A syndicate of investors from Pittsburgh led by J. Weil commissioned Chicago brewery architects Oscar Beyer and Fred Rauter to design the handsome complex. Perfectly sited on a level plain between Sandy Lick Creek and the Buffalo, Rochester, and Pittsburgh Railroad, the brewery shipped its lager as far as Erie, Pittsburgh, and Buffalo. Its most notorious brew was “Budweiser” named for the Bohemian town of Budweis (or Budejovice). The Anheuser-Busch Brewing Company of St. Louis, Mo., sued over DuBois’ use of the name in 1908 (dismissed) and again in 1940. DuBois won that case in 1949 and was allowed to continue using the name for regional distribution. In 1967, Pittsburgh Brewing Company bought DuBois; it closed six years later.

Yet another threatened complex is the former Bauerlein Brewery near Millvale. The stock house is occupied by several businesses, but the stable across the street, sporting terra-cotta horse heads and beer bottles near the cornice, has been vacant for years. Visible from Route 28, but structurally unsound, the stable is scheduled for demolition.

Two more under-used breweries are found in Pittsburgh. The former Duquesne Brewery buildings on Pittsburgh’s South Side
operated from 1899 to 1972, at one point selling more than a million barrels per year. Now the group of buildings — with its signature clock — provides apartments for artists and offices.

What we today see as the "Otto Milk" building on Smallman Street in the Strip District is near the original site of the Wood & Hughes Brewing Company, founded in 1845. After three name changes in 45 years, it became William Tann's Phoenix Brewery. The present building with its brew tower and terra-cotta phoenix at the corner dates from 1890. In 1899, it joined the Pittsburgh Brewing Company consortium; the plant closed in 1920.

The number of U.S. breweries fell from 1,269 in 1860 to half that in 1940, then to 40 in 1980. Pittsburgh followed the national pattern with 33 operating breweries in 1877, but only 14 by 1890, and by 1952, only the Pittsburgh Brewing Company's Iron City Brewery in Lawrenceville remained. It has grown at the corner of Liberty Avenue and 34th Street since 1866 (the business was founded five years earlier). An 1891 building designed by Otto Wolf of Philadelphia sits among other red and brown brick buildings.

The opening of the Penn Brewery in the old Eberhardt and Ober buildings on Pittsburgh's North Side reversed the closings trend. The Pastorius family put life back into the complex by opening a microbrewery and business incubator in two buildings designed by Pittsburgh architects: an 1894 stock house by Joseph Stillburg, and 1891 offices by E. M. Butz.

Brew pubs continue to change the face of the brewing industry. Pittsburgh has recently seen one come and go, but four remain. There are also new microbreweries in Greensburg and Homestead. Perhaps the fine example set by Pittsburgh and Penn Brewing companies will influence the preservation of their buildings.

Dr. Susan Appel of Illinois State University and brewery historians Rich Wagner and Rich Dochter graciously shared their research on breweries.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania, a forthcoming book in the 58-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled Buildings of the United States. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics.