

# Lazarus of old sprouts new life

Sunday, August 8, 2010

That bulbous silver water tower on top of the old Lazarus building Downtown isn't there just for the sake of nostalgia.

It still holds water.

I learned as much on a tour of the rooftop garden that crowns the building where we once flocked to buy toasters, pajamas and pantyhose.

It houses government offices; the OSU Urban Arts Space gallery; and, one of these days, retailers on the S. High Street side of the building.

The garden is open for a free tour on the first Tuesday of each month. I recommend it, especially for anyone with strong memories of Lazarus. It's fun to try to identify the old store's skeleton as you make your way to the top.

"People will come through and say, "Oh, this was women's wear," said Elise Yablonsky, policy analyst for Columbus Downtown Development Corp., which owns the building.

Here's an orientation tip: The light well that allows sunshine into the center of the old building is where the escalators used to be.

The well is one of many green features intended to make the building a model of energy conservation and water recycling. The garden, planted in 2006, seems to be the one that incites the most curiosity. (The September tour is already full.)

Let's be frank about the rooftop garden: We're not talking about the Franklin Park Conservatory here. It's a one-third-acre of grasses, sedums and wildflowers — low-growing stuff that can handle the hot, windy conditions atop an eight-story building.

It reminds me of the vegetation I see on the edge of a beach.

But the garden wasn't designed to be an urban Eden. It was meant to collect rainwater.

"The water we collect off the roof garden goes into a 40,000-gallon tank in the basement, then gets pumped up to the L-ball (the Lazarus water tower) and then, via gravity, is fed down to all the toilets," building manager Robert Turrin said.

When a bureaucrat in the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services flushes, he's using rainwater that percolated through the garden.

Turrin estimates the water savings at \$20,000 a year.

Still, most of the 13-acre roof is just roof.

People ask Turrin why the garden isn't bigger.

"We're limited to that 40,000-gallon tank for water storage in the basement," he said.

The tank couldn't handle all the water that a 13-acre garden would collect.

The garden also has insulation value, thanks to the 16 inches of sand, soil and other materials in which the plants grow.

Dirt piled on the roof actually protects it from weathering. Turrin expects the garden part to last longer than the unplanted surface that surrounds it.

Two membranes keep the rooftop garden watertight.

"It's never leaked," he said. "I wait for that day."

The views are pretty good from the garden, too, and I'm not just talking about the city vistas. Anyone of a certain age who looks up at that big silver ball will see all the way into the past.

*Joe Blundo is a Dispatch columnist.*

jblundo@dispatch.com