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October 10, 2008

Preview: Hamiltonian Gallery on U Street

This Saturday is a milestone in the life of both the Hamiltonian Gallery and Hamiltonian Artists. Not only is it the grand opening of the venue itself, but it marks the first show by So Hamiltonian Fellows. Amid the clatter of last minute construction, DCist got a preview of the space -- which will also be the new home to Project 4 -- and a refresher on the So Hamiltonian Fellowship program that will be showcased Saturday night. (You can read about the program in our interview with its founder, Paul So.)

So acquired the empty Hamilton building approximately two years ago. Located on U Street, the space had been sitting empty for 15 to 20 years. Even though it had been sitting in disuse, the facade still carried the name Hamilton and a mosaic of a printing press, both relics of the building's past life. West Hamilton, along with his brother, ran the press, which was in operation between the 1920s and 1970s. Hamilton was a prominent African-American General who fought in both world wars and served on the D.C. School Board for 21 years. The gallery's name and Fellowship program pay homage to the building's history and its namesake.

The historic building was completely gutted during renovations and the roof dismantled, but the facade was kept intact. Now the building is a mixed use space, with two galleries, a floor of offices, and a private residence. So took advantage of a program that helps D.C. residents fund green roof installation and was profiled by NBC4 for his efforts. There are several green touches throughout the building beyond the green roof, including a zoned HVAC system, bamboo flooring in the upper levels, and Energy Star rated appliances throughout.



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Hamiltonian Gallery, view from entrance. *(Courtesy the gallery)*

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The Hamiltonian Gallery, located on the ground level, boasts over 2,000 square feet. It is a flexible exhibition space for the fellows, who mostly work at their homes or other studios. The gallery has a front cubical area, which is currently being used as a makeshift office, but that can be turned into a media space. The plan for the gallery is to show the fellows's mentors's work in the front of the space, with two to three fellows in a focus show in the rest of the gallery on a five to six week rotating schedule. While the programming of the space is mainly for the Hamiltonian Artists, the gallery will also host shows that will feature artists not in the program.

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The space holds small glimpses of the original structure, with some exposed brick by the media space and in the back of the gallery, in the garage. On the whole, the interior and upper levels of the building took on a modern design, contained within its historic cover.

The rest of the building, located on the upper levels, contain many surprises. Inscape Studio, the architecture and design firm in charge of the renovations and who incorporated the green elements throughout, is moving their offices to the Hamilton building. These offices will occupy the entire second floor.

The next level up consists of two, two-story condo units with a shared deck area. The units are separated by a metal sculpture by Michael Sirvet, one of the Hamiltonian Artists. Though the condos have a modern design, the front unit retains its historical facade on the street side, making the interior design quite a surprise once you come inside. The second unit will be the new gallery space and offices of Project 4. The condos have simple clean lines and a large expanse of windows that let lots of natural light into the units. Both of these units also include green touches such as bamboo flooring, paper stone counter tops, and Energy Star appliances. Project 4's first show in their new space will be in conjunction with Fotoweeek DC in November. Both Project 4 and Inscape Studio plan on moving in on November 1.

New works by Nao Matsumoto, Bryan Rojsuontikul and Ian MacLean Davis will be on display Saturday, October 11 at an opening reception from 7 to 10 p.m.

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