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Once-decrepit Brighton firehouse gets new life

Councilor Mark Ciommo (left) and Mayor Thomas M. Menino attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony yesterday to reopen the Engine 51 firehouse in Brighton. (Dina Rudick/Globe Staff)

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)
Globe Correspondent / July 19, 2011

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In recent years, as returning fire trucks rolled back onto the concrete slab in the Oak Square firehouse, chunks of mortar and dust would fall to the basement floor below.

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dungeon.”

A creaky, sagging, wooden staircase running from the basement up to the firehouse’s third floor was equally risky.

“It was horrifying,” said Lieutenant Dwaine Daye, a 22-year fire veteran. “Nobody wanted to come here. But that’s all changing now.”

Originally built to withstand the weight of horse-drawn fire engines, the first floor of the 98-year-old Brighton firehouse had been temporarily reinforced by wood shoring installed in the level underneath. Firefighters called it “shorewood forest” or simply “the

After completing the largest firehouse renovation project in the history of the nation's oldest fire department, a grand reopening was held yesterday with fire officials, area elected leaders, and local residents.

Daye marveled at the transformation of the building he has worked at for the past decade.

"They've just done a spectacular job," he said.

Last night, Daye spent his 46th birthday working at the Brighton firehouse. It was the first shift anyone has worked there since a \$3 million undertaking began on the three-story building last June. It is the third-oldest active firehouse in Boston, and this was its first major renovation.

Two other city firehouses are scheduled for upgrades within the next year, but of a lesser scale than work done to the Brighton building.

"I don't know of any others that were in the condition the one in Oak Square was," said spokesman Steve MacDonald.

Occasionally, the power would go out. When an emergency call came in, firefighters would have to hop on top of the fire trucks to manually open the station's garage doors, Daye said.

Most of the upstairs walls and hardwood floors were painted a depressing gray, and the interior's brickwork was covered with plaster.

On each floor, there was chronic leaking, along with exposed pipes and wiring, Daye recalled. Where there were no holes in the ceilings and walls, much of the paint and plaster was peeling.

But renovations have vastly modernized the building, while preserving much of the historic fabric of the 12,000-square-foot facility.

The project gutted much of the firehouse. Some aging brickwork and mortar, along with the building's roof and its first-floor kitchen, were replaced, but much of the original masonry and woodwork were restored. The building is now compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and it has improved water- and fire-proofing, energy-efficient heating, and cooling.

Concerns that Engine 51 might fall into the basement have eased. The floor has been secured with sturdy beams underneath. The firehouse's main stairway is now reinforced concrete. In addition to electrical upgrades, there is a backup generator in case the building loses power.

Engine 51, one of 33 active engine companies in Boston, has been based at the firehouse since 1920 and has been the lone occupant of the building's two garage spots for the past 30 years. During renovations, the engine shared space with Engine 41 and Ladder 14 in the District 11 firehouse in Allston's Union Square.

"It's good to be back and not have to worry about the building," said Captain Eric Watson. "We worry about enough things as it is."

Since it opened under the operation of Ladder 31 in 1913, the only previous significant changes to the building site were 17 years ago, when the concrete driveway and apron in front of the firehouse were replaced.

The firehouse is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week by a crew of about 16 firefighters.

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From a top-floor lounge area lined with large bay windows overlooking Oak Square, Daye pointed out toward one business after the other and named the owner of each.

“We know everybody out here,” he said. “This is a neighborhood firehouse. It’s good to be back in the neighborhood. We loved it here, even before this work was done.”

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