



## Ben's Next Door

by G. Martin Moeller, Jr., Assoc. AIA

Rendering of main bar at Ben's Next Door.

Washington is a city of timeless landmarks—the Capitol, the White House, the Lincoln Memorial, and, of course, Ben's Chili Bowl, the endearingly greasy, fluorescently lit fast food joint at 1213 U Street, NW. Oh, yes—though completely free of marble statues and unknown to the typical tourist, Ben's is indeed a historic DC site. For half a century, "The Bowl" has played a dual role as a popular purveyor of calorie-packed meals and as a *de facto* community center. It has carried on the legacy of U Street as a nexus of the city's African American culture, even as its neighborhood has gentrified and Ben's customers have become increasingly diverse. A widely publicized visit to Ben's is a must for anyone seeking citywide political office, and many national celebrities make a point of stopping by whenever they are in town.

The Ali family, which has owned Ben's for 50 years, would not want to mess with success. But when the adjacent building came up for sale a couple of years ago, Kamal and Nizam Ali, sons of the original owners, saw an opportunity to build on that success. They decided to buy the building, which once housed a jazz club and was briefly owned by legendary pianist Jelly Roll Morton, and to open a new establishment that would complement their existing business.

The Ali brothers hired **Group Goetz Architects (GGA)**, a Washington firm known primarily for its interiors work, to design the addition, currently dubbed Ben's

Next Door. The new place is conceived as part sports bar and part jazz club, with space for live performances.

GGA's design draws inspiration from the building's history, and that of U Street in its heyday. "The goal is not to re-create the 1920s," said **Tom Mulhearn**, associate principal at GGA and lead architect for the project, "but we don't want the space to be completely out of character with that era, either." The interior of the annex will be warm and a bit nostalgic, with a ceramic tile floor and a wood bar inspired by the 50-foot-long version that once occupied the space. For the ceiling, GGA has chosen a material that looks like copper, but is actually an acoustical product by Armstrong. GGA is preserving a series of wood beams that currently span part of the space, and adding new ones that continue the rhythm of the existing beams. A stage will be located at the rear.

GGA toyed with the idea of continuing the existing restaurant's famous, canted front window across the new façade, but ultimately concluded that it was best to create a distinct identity for the expansion. Even so, there will be certain cues in the new space that allude to the old Ben's. "There will be some nods to the distinctive colors of the existing restaurant," said Mulhearn. "We want the addition to speak to the universal appeal of Ben's."

Ben's Next Door is expected to open in the late summer or early fall, around the 50th anniversary of the opening of the original restaurant. 🍷