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Iconic Imperial char house in Sugar Land poised to anchor \$1B redevelopment project



Marissa Luck, Staff writer

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The historic Imperial char house. The Imperial Sugar signs will be moved to their original locations on the east and west sides of the building as part of an adaptive reuse of the char house into a mixed-use office, retail and restaurant space. The Char House is part of a broader 40-acre redevelopment of the former Imperial Sugar refinery planned over the next 7 to 10 years.

Raquel Natalicchio/Staff photographer

Stepping into the Imperial Sugar char house in Sugar Land, it can be hard to imagine how the nearly 100-year-old structure was once central to an industrial powerhouse southwest of Houston.

Inside, graffiti stains brick walls, mold covers cracking cement and pigeon feathers clump in a corner. Looking up, there is rusty equipment hanging and black char marking the walls – signs of how the former refinery once processed more than 2 million pounds of sugar daily.

The 150-foot-tall char house towers over Highway 90, a reminder of how it helped create a company town that grew into a prosperous suburb. But the refinery, along with most of the Imperial complex, has sat vacant for 20 years, a vestige of Sugar Land's past.

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Now a Houston-based real estate firm, Puma Development, is partnering with the city of Sugar Land to repurpose the char house and the surrounding complex of former sugar silos and old warehouses. Puma not only wants to restore the historic structures, but to bring them into the future with a proposed 40-acre mixed-use development that could eventually encompass some \$1 billion in investments over the next 7 to 10 years. The development may include 660 apartments and homes, 150,000 square feet of retail and 300,000 square feet of office at full build out, although the final figures have yet to be determined and the planning is in its early stages.

“We have generations of families here (with) a connection to the Imperial Sugar factory and the char house specifically. It has a lot of significance for people who have lived in this area for decades,” said Devon Rodriguez, deputy director of Sugar Land's office of economic development. “I think this is a really unique opportunity for the city of Sugar Land to create something really unique and different for our community.”

A rooftop bar is proposed at the top of the Imperial char house, which is one of the tallest buildings in Sugar Land. The top offers views of Houston's Galleria/Uptown area and much of the city of Sugar Land.
Puma Development

Over the past few months, the city has helped pave the way for Puma's ambitious development. Recently, the city modified zoning to allow hundreds of apartments on site, though more permit approvals are needed. The city also agreed to lease 27,000 square feet of office space in the redeveloped buildings and it offered Puma \$5 million in incentives for the development.

The city is doubling down on its support after earlier development proposals from separate development groups failed to come to fruition in part because of the cost of restoring the historic structures.

Sugar Land's economic incentives, combined with the potential to earn historic tax credits from Texas Historical Commission and the National Park Service, are needed or the project probably wouldn't break even, said Mark Toon, CEO of Puma Development.

Although a former warehouse on site was redeveloped and houses two museums, about 140,000 square feet spread across several buildings remains to be redeveloped, Puma estimates.

Puma is under contract to buy about 40 acres from multiple owners of the refinery site and nearby land along Oyster Creek, Toon said. Most of the land is owned by an affiliate of Hunton Group, a Houston-based HVAC system distributor. Puma expects to close on the deal sometime July to October.

In a project reminiscent of the Pearl Brewery redevelopment in San Antonio, Puma envisions a hip district of restaurants, small shops, offices and potentially an event space or brewery. To help bring its vision to life, Puma has commissioned Urbano Architects, a Houston-based architecture firm whose partners specialize in restoring underused historic buildings.

Puma plans to gradually redevelop the site over several years, but the first phase of the project would focus on finishing the char house in time for the structure's 100th anniversary in 2025. The plan would add a mix of retailers and restaurant on the first floor of the char house with office space and co-working space above, including a location for The Cannon, the entrepreneurial and co-working community Puma has helped to build at multiple locations in Houston.

A rendering of an open office concept at the Imperial Sugar refinery redevelopment.

A self-described architectural history buff, Toon has been eyeing the char house for a couple years as a potential Fort Bend County outpost of the Cannon. Puma's inaugural location for The Cannon, in west Houston near Interstate 10 and Beltway 8, involved an adaptive reuse of former manufacturing buildings into a modern co-working site crowded with startups.

Toon hopes to create a modern mixed-use district where workers also shop, play and live. To that end, Puma aims to partner with a third-party developer to build market-rate apartments, and possibly smaller single-family homes and townhouses.

While it's unlikely Puma would add 660 apartments all at once, they would add to a separate plan by adjacent landowner Sueba USA for 274 apartments. The proposed apartments could rise near the existing 253-unit Imperial Lofts, bringing the area's total number of apartments to about 1,200.

The influx of new apartments would be a radical shift for Sugar Land, where not-in-my-back-yard attitudes and development rules have stifled new apartment construction for years, said Bruce McClenny, senior director at MRI Real Estate's ApartmentData.com.

As a result, about 92 percent of Sugar Land's housing is single-family houses and town homes, and many apartment complexes are almost fully occupied, according to the city.

A view from inside the Imperial Char House showing two old smoke stacks. Much of the grassy area is expected to be house apartments in new buildings.
Raquel Natalicchio/Staff photographer

Although some residents are wary of the new apartments, Puma argues the project could provide much-needed housing for young professionals and service workers who often commute to jobs in Sugar Land from Missouri City, the Galleria and even Tomball.

Puma may also consider building smaller houses and town homes, although that has yet to be determined.

The residential units are part of how the project could become financially viable, Puma and the city say. Puma is studying how it might reduce the effects the project could have on area traffic and schools.

“We’re really taking a very long-term approach to this,” Toon said. “I think Sugar Land and the city really, really wants these buildings to be a part of their future.”

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Previously, Luck covered commercial real estate in Texas for CoStar News; real estate for Austin Business Journal; energy for Houston Chronicle; and business news for The Daily News in Longview, Wash. She's won awards from Society of Professional Journalists and National Association of Real Estate Editors, and her byline has appeared in numerous publications nationally. Originally from Hawaii, Luck grew up in the Pacific Northwest and studied international political economy at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash. She now lives in Midtown Houston.

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