

THE ROPER LOFTS

Lofty Venture Enhances Community Pride

But What About the Bottom Line?

By Shari Held

Houses and businesses boarded up and in various stages of disrepair. Missing windows, missing roofs, neglected and abandoned. It's an all too familiar sight in many downtowns, and until recently that was the case for two buildings in Noblesville.

The property at 304 S. 8th Street, built in 1870, was originally used as a restaurant and tavern. The property across the street

at 347 S. 8th Street was built around 1898 and has historical significance—it housed Roper's Grocery Store, Hamilton County's first African-American owned business. Over the years both had been repurposed into apartment buildings. For the last few years they were vacant and in foreclosure.

In the case of these two buildings, however, a fortunate series of events resulted in their restoration. It all began with the

county being awarded federal funding for the rehabilitation of foreclosed properties. Hamilton County Area Neighborhood Development (HAND), a non-profit organization with a mission to provide affordable housing in Hamilton County, heard about it and submitted a proposal to the county commission requesting funding to rehab the two buildings. It was a classic "right place; right time" scenario, and HAND received approximately \$1.8 million to purchase and rehab the two properties. "The stars all aligned for this project in terms of the funding and the buildings' proximity to down-

town Noblesville and to each other," says Stephanie Burdick, executive director for HAND. "It was kind of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Rehab began last December and the properties, collectively named Roper Lofts, are now fully refurbished. Each building houses four one-bedroom apartments, and the building at 347 S. 8th Street has two office spaces—one of which is HAND's new office. "These buildings are a wonderful opportunity for us to further our mission in proving affordable housing within the county," Burdick says. "Also, just given the location of the building, it's a great opportunity for us to put ourselves out there and become more visible in the community." Burdick hopes to rent the other office space to a non-profit organization with a mission that compliments HAND's mission.

Partnering with the city

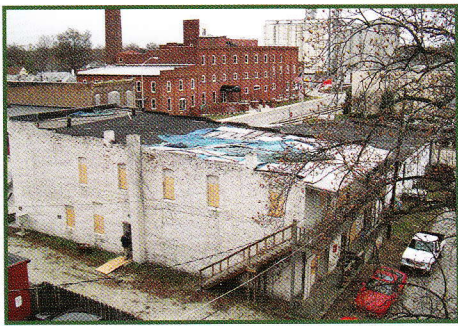
HAND also received funding from other sources, including the City of Noblesville, to pull the transformation off. Getting that was also a stroke of luck. "With non-profits, we give them tax dollars but they don't pay property taxes, so we don't get that recycled benefit," says Christy Langley, assistant director for economic development for the City of Noblesville and program administrator for the city's Façade Grant Program. "But, the location of HAND's project was key—and probably the main factor why we decided to grant this project. Eighth Street is one of our highlighted corridors that we are looking to redevelop, and we realize it needs to be a public/private relationship to do that." HAND received \$17,073 from the Façade Grant Program and additional funding from the State Farm Community Development Grant.



Before: 304 S. 8th Street



After: 304 S. 8th Street



Before: 347 S. 8th Street

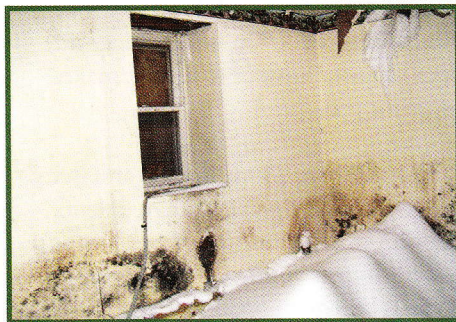


During construction of 347 S. 8th Street

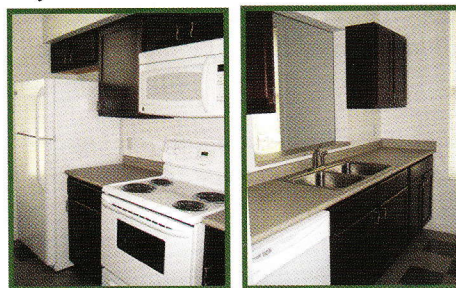
Other rehab is going on in the 8th Street Corridor. The Nickel Plate Arts Trail purchased the Judge Stone house at 107 S. 8th Street to house its cultural center. All of this rehab and restoration is great for the city from an aesthetic viewpoint. Langley says it has made a psychological difference as well. “When people drive down that corridor, they see this momentum and this action, and they start to think a little bit differently about 8th Street,” she says. “That’s what we are going for.”

Sentimental sally or solid business sense?

That’s not always been the case. In the ‘70s downtowns and town centers were



Before: Interior, 347 S. 8th Street



After: Interior, 347 S. 8th Street

thought to be passé, with economic development moving to the suburbs. When development did occur in downtown, older buildings were typically destroyed in favor of new construction. Mike Higbee, managing partner of Indianapolis-based DC Development Group, says we’ve come 180 degrees since then. “We’ve learned over the last three or four decades that that was a mistake,” he says. “We lost some very valuable buildings that contributed to the fabric of the community and that made the community more attractive from an investment standpoint.” He notes that Indiana towns such as Elkhart, Goshen, Columbus and Madison managed to retain their original downtowns with success. “In almost every instance, those downtowns have come back and are going great guns again,” he says.

How can you tell if it makes sense to rehab from a business standpoint? Higbee says the answer depends on several factors. Assuming the location is desirable, the first thing to determine is whether an adaptive reuse that meets a market need can be done economically. Which is less expensive—restoring the property or tearing it down and putting up new construction? Don’t forget to factor in historic tax credits, or check into community or state funding. “Those things can make a difference to the bottom line,” Higbee said. “But the second analysis is, do I have in this historic or unique property something that is not replicable? If it’s a unique asset that can’t be replicated, you can almost get a premium in the right marketplace. There’s a finite quantity of that kind of space, and there clearly is a measurable part of the

market that really sees that type of space as attractive and appealing.”

Higbee says the “big picture” is not more important, but just as important to the evaluation as the number-crunching component.

For the people of Noblesville the completion of the Roper Lofts puts them one step closer to the rejuvenation of the 8th Street Corridor. The eight apartments have already been leased, pointing to a demand—at least in the affordable multi-family housing market.

“We are happy we are supporting the area, and revitalizing the area and making it a better neighborhood,” Burdick says. “Hopefully this will spur additional investment to other properties around us.” ❖



Before: 347 S. 8th Street



After: 347 S. 8th Street