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Northwest Indiana Business Magazine

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ARCHITECTURE/DESIGN

New life for dormant buildings

Companies incorporate historic value of buildings during renovations



Photo, Susan Kohle

Plans for a new Hohman Avenue streetscape and new South Shore Line station now under construction nearby attracted NWI Development Group to turn the Calumet Bank building in downtown Hammond into The Banc, an apartment building with an event space on the ground floor where bank customers used to transact business.

DOUG ROSS

All across Northern Indiana, developers are breathing life into dormant buildings and properties.

In Hammond, it's a bank. In Lowell/Schneider, it's a grain elevator. In Chesterton, it's a middle school. In Michigan City, it's a dairy. In Valparaiso, it's a windshield wiper factory.

Or that's what they were, anyway. Now each site has a new life.

The Banc, Hammond

Jeff Speck, the author of 2012's "Walkable City: How Downtown Saves America, One Step at a Time," also authored Hammond's 2019 Downtown Master

Plan. His influence led to The Banc.

"We were really looking up and down the (South Shore Line) rail investments, and we came upon downtown Hammond, and we saw what Hammond was trying to do with the Jeff Speck plan" for a vibrant, walkable downtown, NWI Development Group Principal Robert Harte said.

"We saw a building that we thought was awesome, and we thought the building deserved a second life."

When Harte first looked at the Calumet Bank building at the corner of Fayette Street and Hohman Avenue in Hammond, it was in rough shape.

"It was vacant and had no running

water, no electricity and had six feet of water in the basement," Harte said.

This project was a huge challenge but also a huge opportunity.

Turning the ground floor, where the bank customers went for their transactions, into an event space and upper floors into apartments allowed Harte's team to preserve the "unbelievable architecture and bones of the building."

The electrical, plumbing and HVAC systems all needed to be replaced.

"It was a daunting project, to say the least," Harte said. "We're north of \$30 million."

The market responded well. Once it was time to start leasing the 100 apartments,

they hit full occupancy quickly.

Of the 140 new residents, 90, or 60%, are new Hoosiers. And of the new Hoosiers, only 60% are from Illinois, Harte said. "We had multiple people from Florida, North Carolina, California relocating into the Chicagoland area."

Harte is now looking at other opportunities in downtown Hammond and throughout Northwest Indiana.

"Great downtowns aren't created by one project," he said. "Every successful project builds momentum."

Duneland YMCA Healthy Living Campus, Chesterton

That momentum is evident in Chesterton, where moving the Duneland YMCA into the former Chesterton Middle School is transforming the whole block.

Jeff Schroeder is CEO of Fort Wayne-based Moake Park Group, an architectural group, which is helping transform the area.

The middle school campus is part of a city block so enormous that Schroeder figures walking around the block would add about a mile to a pedometer.

The campus includes a town park, Duneland School Corp.'s central office, the historic Brown Mansion, and now the Duneland YMCA and partners.

"It's nestled in the middle of a neighborhood," not far from downtown, Schroeder said.

Moake Park Group has spent five years working on the YMCA.

"It was a very large building, huge, way more than the YMCA needed and would be able to maintain," he said.

That led to a decision to raze part of the building, keeping the important pool, of course.

Originally, the 600-seat auditorium and a two-story portion for the building used for classrooms were scheduled for demolition.

"At that point, some of the community members came forward and said they wanted to support the auditorium" for community events, Schroeder said.

The school district is keeping its central office at the site, and it operates an early learning center there, too.

The Duneland YMCA is partnering with other organizations renting space



Elevator 23 in south Lowell is made up of a barn wedding venue and a 100-year-old grain elevator.

there, including a healthy café near the main entrance.

Even with some of the building razed, there's plenty of classroom space to grow programs.

Construction is expected to begin soon on an addition, thanks to generous donors. A planned outdoor pavilion is awaiting future funding.

On that same block, construction was expected to start this summer on a new building to house the Duneland History Center, expanding the museum from the Brown Mansion into a building that resembles the barn that once stood behind the historic mansion.

The new building will house the museum's extensive archives in a climate-controlled space and offer room for staff offices, an area for visiting researchers and programming. Brown Mansion will lose a 1980s addition but regain its wraparound porch and, with the addition of a ramp, become accessible for the first time in the building's 141-year history.

Moake Park Group is involved in that project, too.

"There's some neat synergies

happening there," Schroeder said.

Elevator 23, Schneider/Lowell

Val Vroom saw a property up for tax auction that had a huge old barn.

"I walked in and I screamed, 'Oh my goodness! This place looks like a huge wedding venue,'" she said.

Vroom and her husband, Steve, had been flipping houses on the side, so the barn wouldn't be a problem. Except that the property owner paid the taxes just before running out of time to do so.

"We did not get that property, but it did plant a seed," she said. That seed grew into Elevator 23.

It's a grain elevator, built in 1913, where a lot of families worked.

"My dad actually remembers delivering grain there," Vroom said.

Vroom's husband recommended tearing down the old pole barn and putting up a new one.

Vroom saved the wood and metal to repurpose it. Doing so "100% saved money, but we also wanted to honor the site," she said.

The bar is made of old barn posts. Farm-style tables are made of repurposed wood. Guides on the barn doors are made of old railroad tracks on the 21-acre site.



Photo, Val Vroom

► Val Vroom and her husband, Steve, turned a grain elevator into an event space in south Lowell.

ARCHITECTURE/DESIGN

Redoing the elevator, she said, “just took every ounce of strength and creativity and willpower.”

Graf Dairy, Michigan City

Graf Dairy Holdings founder and CEO Werner Graf II just wanted to get the iconic bottle on the top of his grandfather's old Scholl Dairy but ended up buying the whole building.

“Mostly, I just loved this milk bottle on top,” he said. “It's kind of like the dog catching the bumper sometimes.”

Graf also bought the building next door. The 1916 building's roof had caved in, and the city wanted to demolish it. Graf negotiated with the city to raze the second story and preserve the ground floor.

Together, the two buildings could form a hospitality complex, Graf hopes, with an event venue, speakeasy-style pub and ice cream parlor.

He's betting on Michigan City's future as a popular resort town. The city has many redevelopment projects in the works, including more housing, restaurants and industrial space.

Journeyman Distillery, Valparaiso

In 2018, Journeyman Distillery owner Bill Welter was looking to expand the distillery from its Three Oaks, Michigan, location, which had run out of capacity.

Rob Thorgren, president of the Valparaiso Redevelopment Commission, let Welter know the commission planned to issue a request for proposals for the former ANCO factory, one of the earliest factory buildings in the city's history.

“The timing just kind of worked out,” Welter said.

“I suppose it looked like any old building that had been abandoned for a quarter century,” Welter said. “It was dilapidated. It was in pretty significant disrepair.”

But there were “really cool components of the building. The old elevators had a lot of charm,” and there was signage dating back to the 1950s. “I saw a lot of opportunity for redemption.”

“I think it's a great part of Valpo's history. I think it's Ground Zero for manufacturing, dating back to the 1800s.”

Revitalizing the building was a massive undertaking.

With the work that went into it, Welter hopes the American Factory campus will be around another 100 or more years, a living testament to Valpo's history of manufacturing.

In Hammond, Harte's surprise was the six feet of water in the bank building's basement. Welter's biggest surprise was COVID-19.

“You have a once-in-a-century pandemic in the middle of the project,” he said. “We chose to pause the project for about nine months to see what would develop.”

In retrospect, he sees that as a mistake. The pandemic caused inflation to soar, driving up costs far beyond what he had budgeted for — from \$27 million to \$43 million.

Not everything is done yet. Welter is being patient.

And pensive.

Observations on repurposing buildings

Welter said projects like the American Factory offer a lot of lessons in life



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and in taking on such a big project.

"We put our money in first," Welter said, before realizing, "this project is going to cost 70% more than we anticipated."

"If possible, don't put your money in first," he advised. "Expect the unexpected."

Schroeder's Moake Park Group helps owners make these big decisions with confidence. He enjoys projects like the Chesterton Middle School campus.

"Unfortunately, because we're such a throwaway society, those projects don't happen as often as you think," he said.

"I think it's coming around a little more than it used to."

It's hard to justify the cost of rehabbing vs. building new in a lot of cases, which leads to buildings being replaced rather than gutting existing buildings to repurpose them.

"You do have to do that early investigation," Schroeder said. New HVAC, plumbing, electrical and other building systems are expensive. "We just have to take it down to those bones."

Harte has done a lot of these projects, too. NWI Development Group, a real estate development company, focuses on distinctive projects.

In Michigan City, his company turned a part of the former Zorn Brewery into an event space and apartments.

The NWI Development Group also acquired the former Masonic Temple at Sixth and Pine streets. It's currently an office building, but it has potential to become a boutique hotel when the time is right.

Harte's company has a hospitality division, too.

"The boutique hotel is something I'm really comfortable with," he said.

"We manage over 140 vacation homes in the Region, which is the equivalent of a 1,900-bed hotel."

Harte has partnered with Indiana Landmarks on projects like the Cypress Log Cabin, a 1933 Century of Progress home the National Park Service owns at Beverly Shores, using it for short-term rentals.

There are other success stories across northern Indiana.

Turning the former Gardner School in downtown Valparaiso from a Boys & Girls Club, its most recent use, to

the Grand Gardner Hotel is one example. The hotel incorporates the ornate Romanesque-style turn-of-the-century 1899 building. The 67,000-square-foot space opened in July.

"This project is more than a hotel; it's about adaptive reuse; it's about taking the old and making it new again," said Mayor Jon Costas in a "Valpo View" video. "It's preserving a historic landmark and preserving it for future generations."

But other projects stall.

Gary hoped to turn the Palace Theater around, for commercial and residential use, but that project is on hold, at least for now, as other projects take priority.

Buildings can be rescued for their historic value, but they need to be economically viable for their new use, Harte said.

"For me, the sweet spot is preservation and economic viability." ■



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