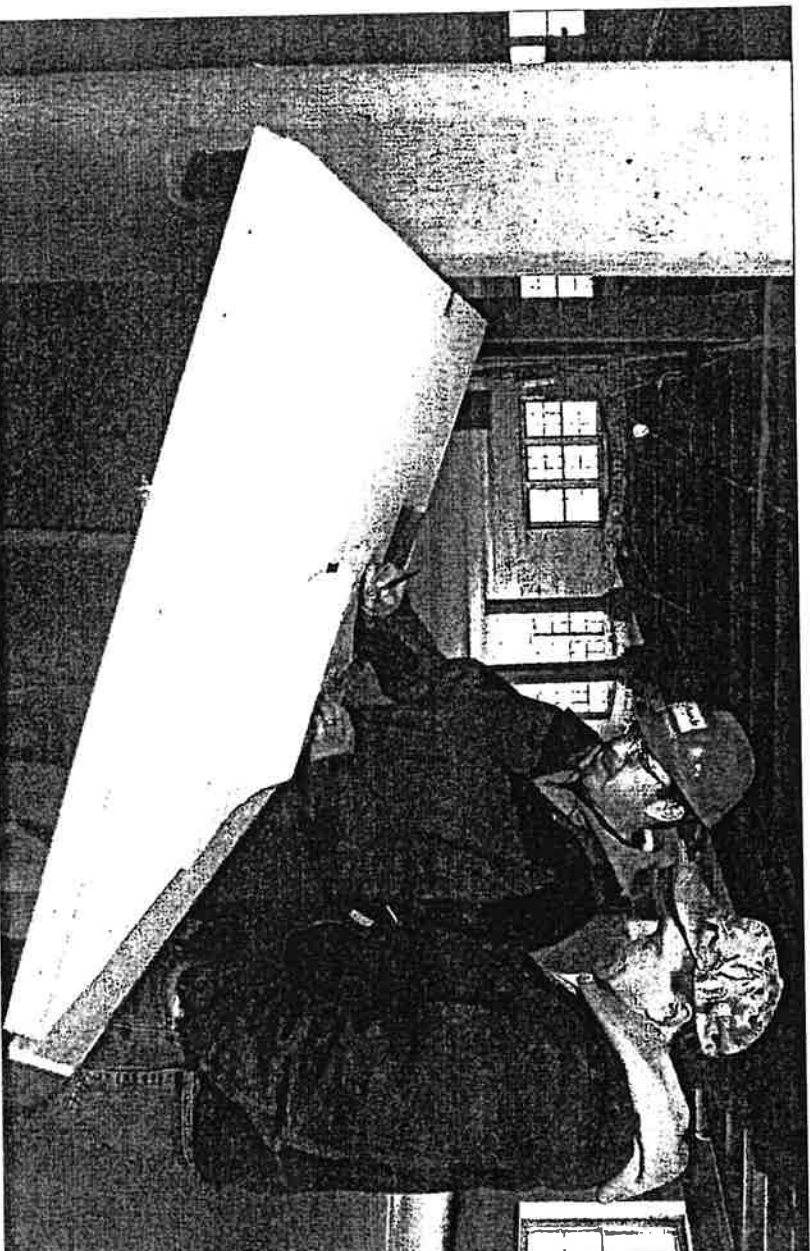


INSIDE

Commercial real estate

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RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY



"This definitely was a brown-field," says Bob Israel, owner of the twin 600 and 601 Fifth St. buildings Grand Rapids. Richard Serbowicz, project manager, and Sam Amshy, project superintendent, review Erhardt Construction's drawings for converting the former John Widdicombs furniture factory into office space. Photo by David Evans

Renovating an old building for modern use may not save money, but it does conserve resources and a community's history.

"When we take an existing building and we move it into current use, we are creating a bridge from one time period to another," said Robert Israel, president and owner of **Israels Designs for Living**.

"We're saving things for future generations and making them practical to be utilized by this generation and generations to come. That's why I call it a bridge."

Bridges can be costly. Israels estimated the cost of renovation at 50 to 100 percent more than building new.

In a residential area on the east side of downtown, the **Inner City Christian Federation** found restoring the D.A. Blodgett Building would be costlier than merely functional new construction.

"I think we are up in the \$170-per-square-foot area," CEO Jonathan Bradford said. "We could build a really fine new building for about \$125 per square foot."

In what he calls his West Side development, Israels has been working

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HISTORY: Conserving a community's architectural roots

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since the late 1970s to acquire and restore industrial buildings constructed between 1840 and the early 1900s. The development area starts at Fourth Street and continues along Seward through Seventh Street in Grand Rapids.

One of Israels' projects: The John Widdicombs Trade Center, was built in 1868 as a furniture factory. The 80,000-square-foot building,

at 601 Fifth St., houses his corporate offices and what the company claims is western Michigan's largest design center. Furniture

buyers from more than 400 retail stores shop there, Israel said. He would not disclose the cost of renovations.

Erhardt Construction handled that renovation, and the company is remodeling the building's twin, at 600 Fifth St. Together, the two buildings take up two city blocks, said Erhardt's vice president for construction, Ben Wickstrom.

The structure is older than the 601 building — it was built as a furniture factory in 1860, a year before the Civil War began. It will become an office space. All the mechanical systems will be replaced, and the

interior brick and wood surfaces sandblasted and cleaned.

"Structurally, it's in great shape," Wickstrom said. "The framing is good — these buildings last forever."

Exterior walls are three-wythe brick — three bricks laid end to end, Wickstrom explained. The interior is post-and-timber framed.

The post columns in the basement of the five-story building are 24 inches on each side. The floors are two-inch-thick tongue-and-groove boards.

"The interesting thing is, we do have to reinforce some of the members to get them up to current code," Wickstrom said. "We need to add floor framing to get the floors to be able to handle office space for storage."

Erhardt is using matching timbers from a section of the roof to shorten the floor-framing spans, he said.

The roof timbers are available because a sixth floor will be added. With a ground-level addition, that will take the 80,000-square-foot building to 120,000 square feet.

A former boiler room will be enclosed by the expansion and converted into the building's lobby.

"We had to clear all the boilers out, but we're going to keep the fronts," Israel said.

"The lobby will be over 30 feet high because the boilers were over 30 feet high."

Apparently nobody in 1948 was impressed by the three-story columns on the Italianate facade of

the D.A. Blodgett Building, when it was donated to **Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital**. The hospital ripped down the columns and erected a functional but featureless addition in front of the original 31,000-square-foot orphanage.

"Mary Free Bed needed to expand the building," said Jonathan Bradshaw, CEO of Inner City Christian Federation, the building's present owner. The hospital made three more additions totaling 34,000 square feet between 1950 and 1957.

After the hospital moved out in 1976, a private individual operated it as office space, then a church bought it in 1996.

The building had been "locked up and left to rot" for the decade before ICCF bought it and the surrounding 3.7 acres for \$400,000, Bradford said.

When restoration of the 1908 situation is complete, costs will total \$8 million, Bradford said. That includes upgrades to earn LEED certification as well as structural and ornamental restoration.

Because the building is both beautiful and a legacy of one of the founders of Grand Rapids, the not-for-profit housing development corporation chose to restore it, Bradford said.

D.A. Blodgett set the bar when asked why he built a gorgeous building for orphans: "For how we treat the founding, so will go the future of our community."