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Restoring Old Utica

Posted by **Mark** on May 20th, 2011

by **Robert Sullivan**

The old Foster Brothers Mill building on Broad St. had definitely seen better days. Originally a bedspring and bedding

manufacturing center, the huge old growth pine timbers of its cavernous spaces were now home to roosting pigeons and mice.



Enter Richard Derosas and Ken Rockett of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Noticing a listing for the building on the internet, their curiosity was piqued. What kind of a city is Utica?

And, how could a building of such generous proportions be on the market for only \$70,000?

The duo bought the property, applied their talents and expertise and turned the building around. It is now the home of Urban Headquarters, a bustling and dynamic artist enclave where once

there was ruin.

These two men certainly had experience with down on your luck properties. Being from Lawrence, a gritty former mill town that had also seen better days, they had the requisite vision and determination needed to rescue 19th century buildings from wrecking crews.

According to Derosas, their first project was an abandoned and dilapidated office building in downtown Lawrence. An historic six story structure built in 1919, it was a candidate for demolition before the Derosas/Rockett team purchased it in 2006.

“It was a disaster, all the windows broken and full of pigeons and debris,” said Derosas. “Downtown Lawrence was dead, with no life or activity, especially after dark. We knew this building could be pivotal to its turn around.”

Several years earlier, Rich and Ken were strangers, both working on the same construction job site. They quickly became friends. “We had similar goals and aspirations and discovered that we are both committed to the reuse of historic buildings,” said Derosas. “We just naturally gravitated to the idea of starting our own company to do the type of projects that would achieve this goal.”

Paramount Construction

Thus, Paramount Construction and Development was formed by the men to articulate their vision of the kind of projects they wanted to accomplish. A self-taught construction worker, Derosas recognized early on the talents of Ken Rockett’s dual career as an electrician and plumber. “He is an incredibly talented man and together we bring a perspective to development that is often overlooked,” Derosas said.

That perspective, according to Derosas, is historic preservation combined with current technology that, when combined in a sensitive way, creates a product that is fresh and exciting. “Our buildings combine the best features of the 19th and early 20th centuries with the technology and building materials of the 21st,” said Derosas. “And, because we reuse so much of the original building fabric, it’s a green product as well.”

The building in downtown Lawrence was the achievement of this type of development mind-set. The end result was a hip urban mix of upper floor residential units combined with ground floor retail and office space. “It was a real boost to downtown Lawrence,” said Derosas. “It almost immediately helped to change the perspective of that area of town into some thing vibrant and exciting.”

Paramount Construction was on its way. As developers who also knew the complex world of construction and building systems, they were successfully wearing the two hats needed to be successful developers. One project that was

particularly challenging was the conversion of an old factory and warehouse in Haverhill, Massachusetts. This city of 60,000, located in the northeast corner of Massachusetts, was full of old 19th century mill buildings that Paramount Construction decided to focus on. “We took an old, under utilized building and turned it into 58 units of affordable workforce housing,” said Derosas. “It was a real challenge but we loved the result and decided that renovating mill buildings was a direction that we wanted to go.”

At the same time, they had also undertaken the conversion of an old church property in Lawrence. “We bought an old Catholic Church that included a rectory, school and convent,” said Derosas. “Everyone thought we were crazy, that we could not make it work.”

But make it work they did, and today the Dominican Friars lease the rectory and church. “We turned the convent and school into 36 units of very nice housing” and, according to Derosas, the property today is fully utilized and maintained. “We took a potentially liability for the City of Lawrence and turned it into an asset that preserved a landmark and gave it new life.”

Treasure Utica

After purchasing the Foster Building on Broad St. in Utica, Rich and Ken started noticing other properties that were coming on the market. One of these was the Knights of Columbus Building on Genesee St.. in the heart of the Arts District. “We saw this incredible and amazing building that was practically being given away and began to wonder, what else could be available in Utica?”

The K of C building was their next purchase. Built in 1860, the Italianate Mansard-roofed mansion had been the home of the Knights since the turn of the 19th century. Along with a tremendous gymnasium constructed in 1917, the structures had been ravaged by a fire in July of 2006. The Knights had a dilemma-what to do with a white elephant that they could not demolish and did not want to repair.

Enter Paramount Construction. “We specialize in white elephants,” said Derosas. “We will take any color that has potential!” After negotiating a sale price of \$5,000 (that’s right-\$5,000!) Derosas and Rockett began to slowly transform the rambling old mansion and gymnasium. Dank, fire damaged carpeting and drop ceilings were stripped from the interior. The removal of architecturally insensitive additions such as cheap plywood paneling and debris was the next priority. Derosas points out that the building is a treasure trove of artifacts that have somehow, miraculously managed to survive years of insensitive renovations and the fire.

A grand staircase of beautifully carved oak and walnut ascends the first floor hall with its ceilings of intricately sculpted and molded plaster-work. Large pocket doors define the entrance to the grand parlors with floor to ceiling windows and ornately carved marble mantels topped with gilded plate glass pier mirrors.

In the back, the old gym’s hardwood floor burned completely through. The magnificence of the space still shows through the charred and smoke stained walls and pressed tin ceiling. The old spiral staircase still descends to the lower level pool, with its intricate Titanic-era mosaic tiles still evident. The large and formal Knights ballroom is over the gym and sustained minor damage. Its galleried main floor of polished hardwood and Palladian windows bespeak an earlier era of glamour and elegance.

“We were suitably impressed when we first saw the building and realized that, for the price, we had to have it,” said Derosas. But, what could be done with such a building?

“That was the dilemma.” According to Derosa. “We had to be respectful of the buildings heritage and its location across from MWPAI and next door to the Library.”

After initial stabilization, structural work such as repairing the leaking roof and replacing windows was started. It was at this point that another Utica landmark came on the market, one that would markedly change the direction of Paramount Construction and its owners.

Rutger Park

Rutger Park in Utica, NY is a magnificent example of 19th century prosperity at its zenith in upstate NY. This row of 5 stately mansions was built between 1830 and 1890. The entire Park is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Numbers 1 and 3 were purchased by The Landmarks Society of Greater Utica. Now in stable and capable stewardship, the future of these structures seems bright.

Unfortunately, the fate of the other three was not so rosy. A magnificent carpenter Gothic designed by A. J. Davis, Number 2 fell to neglect and was demolished in 1993. This unfortunate demolition prompted the formation of the City of Utica Scenic and Historic District in order to halt the destruction of landmarks in the future.

Number 5, home for many years to the Teamsters Union, is currently vacant and in disrepair. Its future is unclear and if stabilization is not undertaken soon, more loss of stonework and degradation of its exterior wood and granite trim will become irreversible.

The Swancott Home at Rutger Park

The Swancott Home was perhaps the most noteworthy and infamous of all. Built and occupied by the Bagg Family for close to 100 years, it became the Swancott Home in the late 1940's. Originally intended to serve as a haven for unwed mothers, it later became a home for elderly women. After its closure, the Rescue Mission of Utica purchased the structure in 2008 for \$155,000.

Immediately, outcry from the community threatened to derail the Rescue Mission's quest to increase their bed count in the historic Rutger St.. neighborhood. Led by neighborhood opposition and concerns expressed by Landmarks Society, The Rescue Mission backed away from their proposal and decided to auction the property. It was sold for \$66,000 to a private purchaser for use as a residence. Intended for shared private living space for four families, the auction purchasers changed their minds and backed away from the purchase. They opted to lose their deposit of over \$14,000 rather than see the deal through to completion.

It was back to square one for the Rescue Mission and at that point, Rich and Ken took notice. "We had heard about this building in the news and were curious to see what it was like, what condition it was in," said Ken. "We were pleasantly surprised when we saw it for the first time."

An earlier Italianate design, the simplicity of the original house had been "updated" in the more ornate style of the 1880's. The large tri-partite parlors that stretch across the width of the front of the house were decorated with large, flat and simple arched pocket door surrounds and floor to ceiling windows with full length pocket shutters. Across the hall, the dining room is replete with carved golden oak three quarter height wall panels and a six foot high mantelpiece.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the home is the fireplace inglenook in the front entrance hall. With built in benches flanking the firebox and original gas and electric fixtures and arts and crafts green tiles, the original fear of the Landmarks Society was that this feature, along with original gas chandeliers and stained glass, would be stripped from the building and sold for their antique value.

Rich and Ken expressed relief that this did not happen. "This building is a treasure and we are so glad it was spared the fate of so many of Utica's other landmarks," said Derosas. "We are determined to keep all of its features intact while updating the systems and restoring as much as possible the original footprint and design of the house."

All of the original hardwood floors have been meticulously restored by Steve Francis of Utica. The result is breathtaking. Buttery oak melds with pumpkin pine and various heartwoods throughout the house. The finish is silk-like on all three floors and extends up the staircases.

“We even did the third floor gallery-office of Egbert Bagg,” said Derosas, referring to Bagg, one of the residents of the home and an early local surveyor. The huge third floor space, lined with floor to ceiling bookcases, has a small staircase leading to the out side observatory balcony.

Offering a breathtaking view of the Rutger Park and the hills to the north, one can take in the magnificence of this 19th century monument to prosperity and imagine the grand parade of dignitaries that must have arrived in horse drawn carriages.

Proud to Call Utica Home

And, that may happen again at the site. Ken and Rich are pulling up stakes in the Boston area and are going to make the park their home. Rich is planning to have his 5 year old son spend time with him here and Ken is looking for an old home as well in the neighborhood.

“We love Utica and want to make it home for us and for our families. The development opportunities are wide open and we think that there is a bright future for us here,” said Derosas.

What does that future include for the Swancott home? According to Derosas, he envisions that the public spaces may some day be used for special events, even small weddings and receptions. “This place is so special that we want to share it with the community. It may some day be open for use and compliment the eventual historic functions of the Landmark Society properties next door,” He said.

For now, they intend to continue with the projects at hand. In addition to the Broad St.. property and the K of C Building, they also own the former Photo fair building on Columbia St.. and a small brick townhouse on Lafayette St.. “We have a lot of work to do this summer on our properties,” Derosas said. “Our priority is the restoration of the Swancott, but we want all of our investments in Utica to make the community proud.”

If the start is any indication, we will be!

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