

www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-aurora-downtown-w-zone-10-jul10,0,1774322.story

chicagotribune.com

Aurora shows signs of reviving downtown

Many properties have been updated, and city is encouraging people to live there

By Margaret Ramirez

Tribune reporter

July 10, 2009

For nearly 50 years the old Holbrook Mill stood sadly in downtown Aurora with a sagging roof, a shaky foundation and cracks running through its yellow limestone facade.

Like many of the other historical structures in the center of Illinois' second largest city, the stone building, believed to have been built before 1850, symbolized the rugged beauty of Aurora's industrial past and the shameful neglect of the present.

But after museum curator David Lewis bought the mill in June 2006, the two-story facade was dismantled stone-by-stone, the foundation was rebuilt and the original stones were reset on a new frame. The unusual restoration process for one of Aurora's oldest commercial buildings was time-consuming and extreme. Yet, by using some of the original limestone and obtaining approval from the Aurora Historic Preservation Commission, Lewis said the mill would retain its historic landmark status even as its interior is updated into a home and office space.

"I love old buildings, and I love challenges. And what we did here is created a new building with the old stone," said Lewis, who is curator of the Aurora Regional Fire Museum.

"This is not just about rehabbing a building, it's about changing attitudes of downtown Aurora," he said.

Lewis is part of a recent wave of developers that has rescued neglected properties in Aurora's downtown and transformed them into condos, funky loft apartments or commercial spaces. In a big push to revitalize the struggling downtown, city officials have provided about \$300,000 annually in grants to business and property owners for restoration projects.

Much like its old, neglected buildings, downtown Aurora struggles to redefine itself, hoping to move from a desolate, no man's land to a bustling shopping and cultural hub along the winding Fox River. But the path and pace has been ragged due to decreased revenue, budget cuts and difficulty in luring new businesses.

Even so, the first signs of downtown Aurora's reawakening are finally visible. Last month, city officials held a Living Downtown tour of 11 rehabbed properties to raise awareness of Aurora's history, show off recent restorations and attract new residents.

Stops on the tour included the Holbrook Mill; the Stolp Woolen Mill Dye House, which was transformed into the family home of developer Dan Hites; and the Leland Tower, a legendary hotel and

blues recording studio that is now the Fox Island Apartments.

Several more ambitious projects are in the pipeline, including plans to develop the east and west banks of the Fox into a shopping and restaurant riverwalk; construction of a 30-acre RiverEdge Park, which is expected to cost more than \$12 million; publication of a new magazine called Downtown Auroran, and a Facebook page that lists news, photos and coming events.

"If you looked at downtown Aurora in the 1980s, it looked like the bombing of Dresden," said Karen Christensen, Aurora downtown development director. "So we decided that we needed to look at our buildings. We needed to recognize history and preserve our architecture. People don't think of downtown Aurora as a place to live. We want to change that."

For several decades after the Great Depression, downtown was known as one of the most vibrant areas in the state, said John Jaros, executive director of the Aurora Historical Society. Midwest farmers flocked to Aurora to patronize the small shops or three big department stores. There were two swank hotels, the Leland and Aurora Hotels, and also theaters and supper clubs that drew crowds on the weekends.

"Back then, everything you could possibly want was in downtown Aurora," said Jaros. "There were many locally owned men's hat shops, women's clothing stores. We had Sears, Carson's and Montgomery Ward."

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, with the arrival of malls and suburban sprawl, retail shopping began to migrate away from downtown, and the area started to decline. At the same time, Aurora's economy suffered due to the exodus of factories and local industries. After Sears moved out in 1958 and the Fox Valley Mall opened in 1975, downtown hit rock bottom.

"What happened in Aurora is really a trend that happened in downtown areas all across the U.S. The industrial era ended, factories moved and downtowns were dying," Jaros said.

When the Hollywood Casino opened in 1993, many hoped it would spur downtown activity. Instead, the casino prompted worry and fear that Aurora would become known as "the city with the casino." Shortly after, city officials commissioned several reports to map a strategy for revitalizing downtown. Design and consultant firms that studied Aurora echoed similar recommendations: development of the Fox riverfront, attracting better retail businesses and emphasizing ethnic diversity.

Christensen said one obstacle was the aging population of downtown building owners who held onto their structures even when they could no longer maintain them. In 2001, city officials began providing financial incentives to rehab old buildings.

"We find that buildings get revitalized when they get a new owner who has the cash and vision to see potential," Christensen said.

Hites, an intrepid developer, bought and rehabbed three downtown properties, including the Stolp Dye House for his home. The nearby Aurora Woolen Mill Factory is being leased to a recording studio, and the old W.S. Frazier & Co. building at 60 S. River St. was converted into loft apartments.

"When I was looking for buildings, I kept coming back to Aurora again and again. I like the fact that there is an island right in the middle of downtown. Just looking at it, you can feel what it can be," Hites said.

That may be a ways off. Despite the arrival of new businesses like the River's Edge Cafe, there is little pedestrian foot traffic.

The vibe is closer to sleepy than busy.

"We still need more destinations, more restaurants. We need more residents living here who have disposable income," Christensen said.

Jaros also remains hopeful.

"It's going to be a different kind of vibrant. It's going to be more focused on being a downtown living and cultural area," he said. "We were in the dark for a long time. Now, we can finally see some light."

maramirez@tribune.com

Copyright © 2009, [Chicago Tribune](#)