

No 'bones' about it: Refurbishing old buildings works

BY DENNIS HUSPENI
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Is it better to demolish or refurbish? Owners of older buildings have been debating that question more, as the recession has lowered construction costs in recent years and re-sale prices haven't gained much ground.

Turns out that refurbishing very old buildings was the best option in two recent Denver examples.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation is in the midst of a \$3.2 million rehab of the Emerson School, 1420 Ogden St. It was built in 1885.

And Jesse Morreale sunk millions into refurbishing 101 N. Broadway, which was built in 1905, and managed to turn the neglected, dilapidated former 1st Avenue Hotel into a vibrant place with the addition of trendy restaurant El Diablo and Sketch Wine Bar.

Turns out, it's all in the bones. "You find that a lot with buildings built between the 1880s and the 1930s or 40s," said Gary Petri, principal with SlaterPaul Architects Inc., who is working on Emerson. "Buildings that were built in that era were generally well-built and have good bones."

Sometimes, putting some new skin on those bones is all it takes.

"If all the costs are considered, the renovation of a building is often less expensive," Petri said. "Sometimes building owners just don't look at the whole picture. It's a myth that renovation costs more than building new. It's not true. If you try to replace it with the same sturdy construction, it costs more."

Morreale's company, M Inc., has been revitalizing run-down buildings for years



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The National Trust for Historic Preservation is in the midst of a \$3.2 million rehab of the Emerson School at 1420 Ogden St., built in 1885. Preserving the historic nature of the school is a factor when refurbishing an old building.

and has a new project at 800 Lincoln St., where the now-shuttered Mapsco Inc. was located.

He declined to provide specifics on who might use the building. Morreale is responsible for the successful Mezzal restaurant, 3230 E. Colfax Ave., and nearby Rockbar at 3015 E. Colfax Ave. — both refurbished buildings.

"I'm not the classic developer. I don't go and look at things and make some kind of square-foot analysis, or ask what rate can it bring in," Morreale said.

"I may see an opportunity or a need

somewhere and try to find something that will fit it."

More often than not, those opportunities have been with bigger properties in city center.

The Broadway building was a mess when he bought it, with no heat, water or sewer, Morreale said.

"I just had to take small bites out of the apple," he said of the improvements to the infrastructure and facade to start the project.

"I didn't just say, 'Here's what to do' and hand it to a project manager," Morreale

said. "You must re-invent yourself to do business anymore. The old ways don't work."

And he didn't try to make it look spit-polished new, respecting the tradition of the building's character.

"Just look at El Diablo. It doesn't feel brand new," Morreale said. "It feels like it's been there forever."

Petri specializes in restoring historic buildings and said they can bring value that goes beyond the cost to refurbish them.

"Historic buildings often have a lot of character and contribute to the context in the neighborhoods they're in," he said. "You just can't do that kind of thing with today's typical building budget."

The National Trust is hoping to make Emerson a model for how old buildings can be retrofitted and made green.

A geothermal heating and cooling system was installed under the school's parking lot, and Petri said the solid masonry construction of the original construction will reduce heating and cooling costs.

Those older buildings "had a certain redundancy built into the design, which makes them somewhat more adaptable to other uses," Petri said.

Then there's the satisfaction of making something old relevant again.

"The most important thing to me is making it matter again," Morreale said. "I enjoy doing something creative and contributing something."

Petri said, "Re-using these buildings helps revitalize the downtown area. There's been some very good examples of that recently."

DHUSPENI@bizjournals.com | 303-803-9232

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