CASE STUDY:

SMALL-SCALE HISTORIC REHAB

Viewed from the street, the brick double-ender is restored to its former glory. Inside are modem offices; in back a 2,500 square-foot commercial addition.

Making it fly depends on good instincts, good planning, and mastering the fine art of compromise

Staff Report

When Graham Goldsmith saw the rundown brick house one block from the waterfront in Burlington, Vt., he sensed the makings of a small commercial development. The historic waterfront district was undergoing rapid redevelopment—attracting shops and restaurants. These nearby amenities, he reasoned, would attract quality tenants to the brick house, despite the fact that it lay on a somewhat rundown street of mostly residential tenements.

Upon closer examination, the unassuming brick double-ender held even greater appeal. Built in 1780 by Lake Champlain merchant Gideon King, it turned out to be the oldest standing structure in the city and was eligible for federal rehab tax credits.

Also, because it would help revitalize the mixed residential and commercial street it was on, architect and developer Goldsmith recognized that the Gideon King project would qualify for low-cost financing through the Vermont Industrial Development Authority (VIDA).

The project would have flown financially with neither the rehab credits nor the VIDA financing, says Goldsmith. But these made it even more attractive. He was acquainted with the mechanics of both these subsidies through his design work on several other rehab projects.

Trucks and Barns

When Goldsmith bought the house, it was serving as office space for a local trucking company, with. an apartment on the top floor. The large yard housed the remains of an old barn. Because the 30x40-foot house sat right on the sidewalk with no front yard, ample space lay free in the back of the 100x125-foot property for an addition and parking for 20 cars.

The building itself was in poor condition with crumbling plaster, deteriorated pine floors, and no central heating system. The basement had a low ceiling and a dirt floor. But several interior features were distinctive. Foremost, perhaps,. were the five working fire-places: the one in the basement contained a large beehive oven—now gracing an insurance office. Several interior doors, including oversized board and batten doors leading to a cold-storage area, were also salvaged.

To make the project fly financially, Goldsmith needed to add more office space in the back. The options were to renovate the barn, add a separate building, or build an addition. Some rough calculations determined that a three-story addition would be the most economical choice: adding about 2,500 square feet of office space to the 4,000 square feet in the main house.

Permits and Approvals

The key to a successful commercial development, says Goldsmith, is getting your permits and approvals in a timely fashion. "Each aspect must dovetail with the others," he says. "For instance, historic requirements often conflict with fire-code issues."

In this case, the fire marshall wanted a second egress. added to the original structure, while the Division of Historic Preservation did not want to see the new stairs erode the "historic fabric" of the building. A compromise was struck: The new stairwell was tucked in where the addition joined, and did not show on the building's exterior.

Another wrinkle with the fire code was the building's ambiguous combustibility status. It had solid-brick end walls, but wood framing under the side walls. The addition was to be light woodframe construction.

Another compromise was struck here—to let the building's back wall function as a fire wall separating the original building from the addition. Consequently, neither space was large enough to require sprinklers.

Another compromise was struck regarding building height. The original plan called for a full three-story addition. But the State's Division of Historic Preservation objected. Their goal was to leave the original structure visually unchanged from the street. In addition, they did not want the new structure to compete aesthetically with the old. Goldsmith compromised by limiting the addition to two stories plus loft, lowering the foundation a little, and keeping the form simple. Exposed timbers were used both inside and outside the addition to help it fit in with its host building.

The other needed approvals presented few problems. There was ample parking, setbacks, open space, etc. No zoning variances were needed. The

Construction took five months. To comply with the wishes of the Division of Historic Preservation, the addition had to be reduced in height, made aesthetically compatible with the original house, and be mostly out of view from the street.

local design review by the city of Burlington was favorable. The planning commission wanted a few trees planted on the street. With the approvals in hand the project was off the ground.

Had the design changes—the secondary egress and building height—been made late in the process, said Goldsmith, he would have had to resubmit the changed plans to all the approval bodies. The trick, he says, is to get input by all the interested parties as early on in the process as possible—before formally submitting the design. "Almost all the administrative bodies have good valid reasons for their decisions," he says. "For the most part, they want to improve the safety and aesthetics of the project.

"State your case as objectively as possible. If they ask for additional information, give it, don't argue. Eventually, they will compromise. But if you go storming the beaches, ranting and raving, you're just going to make enemies and get nowhere."

Construction

With the approvals in hand, work on the house was completed in about five months. Hard costs for the renovation were $40 per square foot (1984 dollars) and hard costs for the addition were about $50 per square foot.

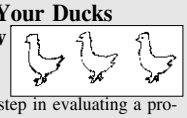
Work in the rehabbed section consisted of gutting the house, insulating, and adding all new interior finishes with the exception of a few wide-pine floors and a few doors, which were salvaged and restored. All new mechanical systems were installed. The original double-hung wood windows were deemed not worth saving and were replaced with insulated Marvin double-hungs (with true divided lites).

The new section was 2x6 woodframe construction with naturally weathered clapboard siding on the exterior. The floors were 1x4 custom-milled maple.

The finished 6,500 square-foot project now houses an insurance company, graphic design firm, and the offices of the project's developer and designer.

"It's good to adapt old buildings for new uses," says Goldsmith. Gideon King the merchant would probably be happy as well with the 20th-century businesses occupying his 18th-century home. And because of the fine art of compromise, the neighborhood, the historic commission, and the town, are also happy. ■

Getting Your Ducks in a Row



The first step in evaluating a project is to identify potential problems by making a quick check of all the necessary approvals. The considerations include:

- **Building code:** Skim the code to see if the building complies with basic structural requirements: floor and roof loadings, stair and hall dimensions, etc.
- **Design review:** Will the municipality accept overall design
- **Planning board:** How will the project affect traffic and parking in the area? Will signage be a problem?
- **Zoning board:** Are occupancy, parking, open-land, setbacks, etc. in compliance with local zoning? Are any variances needed ?
- **Fire-marshall:** What is needed to meet fire-safety codes, such as sprinklers, egress, firewalls, fire-rated construction? How might these conflict with other requirements?
- **Division of Historic Preservation:** Does the project qualify for rehab credits? Will they approve of the planned rehab?
- **Structural:** Is the planned rehab feasible structurally? Talk to your engineer.
- **Environmental:** Does the pro posed project comply with applicable environmental laws! All commercial projects in Vermont must comply with Act 250, which covers all aspects of environmental impact.
- **Special problems:** Will the work disturb existing tenants? Will access to the site for workers and materials be a problem?

Examine each of these areas for possible red flags. Look, in particular, for conflicts between one area and another — such as fire-code requirements and historic-rehab criteria.

Once you have worked out a preliminary plan, arrange for informal meetings with the parties that will be granting approvals. Get their input early, before you make your formal submittals.

If you run into a snag late in the process, you'll have to go back and resubmit the changed plan to all the other parties. Or worse still, the whole project could run into a costly or inpenetrable stone wall.

— Graham Goldsmith