

APRIL 15, 2009

Step Lightly

Renovated synagogue serves as a cultural medium to reduce carbon footprint, promote arts

BY ERIN FORE

Those rallying for sustainable development in Tulsa lack a permanent space where citizens and non-profits can organize themselves in order to effectively manage the movement. What's needed, in other words, is a resource center.

Developer Kevin Stephens sees potential for that in the old synagogue at 14th and Cheyenne. The first in Oklahoma, it was once home to the Temple Israel congregation. The building has been vacant for more than a decade, and when Stephens bought it last spring, he eagerly began to spruce up the grounds. His plan to reopen the building to the public in fall 2009, however, was thwarted when a fire that was started in the basement consumed the interior entirely, temporarily delaying renovations.

There was some speculation as to the cause of the fire, which occurred the night of the ice storm, January 26. Officials concluded that a homeless person started it, possibly in an effort to keep warm.

Stephens, who owns a design firm in San Francisco called Kevin Stephens Design Group, Inc., has been coming to Tulsa since he began renovating residential properties here and visits about every two weeks.

Having worked in the design field for 12 years and in construction for 16, Stephens started making real estate investments about seven years ago. After experiencing some success, he began to look for others outside of California; and it was then that he stumbled upon Tulsa during his market research. Stephens immediately felt excited about the opportunities here.

"Tulsa looked good for several reasons; there was a high white-collar job growth rate...and a niche to be filled building housing downtown," he explained. He began buying properties mainly on the periphery of downtown and on Cherry Street about two years ago, and has been in love with the area ever since.

Until now, Stephens has concentrated on restoring historic homes, honoring the original façades but adapting the interior to modern living with sleek, efficient fixtures, particularly in bathrooms and kitchens.

Then during a jog a couple of years ago, Stephens came across the neglected edifice and, intrigued, found out who owned the place. He originally envisioned it to be a music conservatory. In fact, he bought the property from Barthelmes Conservatory, whose clientele had outgrown the space anyway. Stephens' vision changed, though, when the need for a sustainable development resource center soon became apparent. Part of that had to do with its central location, which is an important aspect for any organization in a thriving, cohesive metropolis.

"It's one of the basic rules of good urban design," he said. "It will keep downtown the vital center of the community."

Stephens has collaborated with one potential tenant, Land Legacy, a non-profit that seeks to protect Tulsa's oldest structures, and with others who want to see as much of the building preserved as possible, due to its historical significance. Another prospective tenant is Sustainable Tulsa, an organization that focuses on a number of individual and collective green living practices.

The upstairs auditorium is ideal for holding lectures and seminars in order to educate the public about a community's impact on its environment.

By night, the space is also meant to showcase local performance and visual art; Stephens pointed out he wants to give budding talents, who may not otherwise have a home, much-needed exposure. While doing so is high on his list of priorities, Stephens is most excited about spreading eco-awareness throughout the city.

His roots in California, where green efforts are more pervasive than here, give him a sound vision when it comes to sustainable development in a city like Tulsa. He hopes to implement features like solar power, a rainwater collection system, eco-friendly landscaping, etc. These practices are far more common on the West Coast; and while Midwesterners have begun to consider their impact on the planet, only a small percentage of the population has changed their lifestyle.

Individualized aspects of green living like recycling or composting only do so much good. An eco-conscious mindset needs to pervade all aspects of society, especially new projects; and this is where Stephens' expertise and motivation matters.

"I think all of our new construction should be at least pre-wired for solar paneling," he said. "We also need to be using less petroleum-based products." Non-toxic materials are far more abundant than they used to be and more affordable, too.

"They're the same price, but they don't have negative byproducts; and they're as easy to get as traditional ones." However, Tulsa, as well as the rest of the region, is lagging behind its coastal counterparts, but Stephens doesn't think the problem is negligence.

"I think it's because people just don't know, and that we get used to our habits," he said.

The same can be said for midtown revitalization, however, because as a society, we tend to throw everything out, especially usable resources that can be recycled. Tulsa's curbside recycling program, while relatively progressive, doesn't encourage citizens to be mindful of their waste, because we're charged for the service.

In San Francisco, however, folks are charged for trash pick-up based on the weight of the refuse. Stephens thinks this is an incentive that makes a substantial difference.

"It forces people to think about every piece of trash they put in their cans."

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