

Saving a decaying structure in crumbling times



PHOTO BY RIP STELL

President Kim Reeve and Principal George Rochelle of BKL Inc. stand in the newly refurbished offices of the firm's building near downtown Tulsa.

Tulsa engineering, architectural firm honored for renovation

BY KIRBY LEE DAVIS
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TULSA – BKL Inc. found itself in a classic office dilemma. Working its way out earned the Tulsa engineering and architectural company a Preservation Oklahoma award.

Having grown to 18 employees, the 63-year-old firm set sail three years ago in Tulsa's surging economy to find a new home.

Seeing its best options downtown, the principals searched over a year before stumbling upon the former brick masonry headquarters of TulOil, two 1923 buildings raised during Tulsa's eastern expansion. In 2005, Tim Clement bought the small warehouse and office at 1623 E. Sixth St. for his own manufacturing company, removing the many leftover oil tanks and refurbishing the windows, but found the task too great.

"It was in beautiful condition," said President Kim Reeve, who with principals George Rochelle and Stacy Loeffler manages BKL. "You don't find many buildings with exposed riveted trusses, exposed walls. The neighborhood just isn't an office neighborhood, but that's also what you expect when you move into a warehouse."

So BKL paid \$425,000 for the site in November 2007, just as the national down-

turn began to slide into recession. BKL immediately started its own extensive renovation, lowering the warehouse floor 38 inches and designing a glass lobby to combine the two structures into one 11,000-square-foot office complex.

As it progressed in that \$900,000 project, surging commodity prices that had buffered Oklahoma's economy suddenly reversed course, wounding SemGroup LP and bringing many area real estate developers and projects to an equally sudden stop.

While its architectural side soon felt that, Rochelle said BKL's civil and structural engineering revenue streams gave the firm headway last fall to maintain the office project, which generated more excitement as it picked up steam.

"It took a lot longer than we thought, and it was challenging at times to carve out time to work on your own building while you're already juggling several client projects, but it was well worth it," Reeve said.

BKL placed a standing steam roof over the original corrugated metal roof, with ductwork suspended from its steel trusses. Workers power-washed the interior brickwork to remove loose paint and applied a coat of clear sealer.

With the lowered floor allowing a 2,900-square-foot mezzanine, BKL added a stairwell with chrome railing, light bamboo floors in the conference room, and other elements to augment the brickwork. Rochelle said that created a wide-open office environment warmly different from the 1950s structure they'd outgrown.

"People enjoy coming to work here," said

Reeve. "Psychologically, it's very good for our employees. Architecturally, they're extremely excited about the space."

BKL moved into the still-unfinished space in December, wrapping the year with revenue on par with 2007 at \$2.1 million. Benefiting from road projects funded by a 2008 Tulsa tax program and President Obama's 2009 stimulus package, Reeve expects this year's revenue to parallel 2008 results.

"We've been beating the bushes like everyone else really hard, and we're starting to some return from that," he said.

Their office transformation drew praise from neighbors in the Pearl District, which has pursued several regional improvement projects to address remaining storm water problems. One proposal involves a canal that would pass along Sixth Street and the BKL office, promising dramatic economic improvements to the still-struggling area.

"We don't expect this in a year or two," Reeve said. "We know it's a long-term deal. We did this as a long-term deal. We're benefiting from it every day. We don't have to have a payoff at the end."

Their renovation efforts earned BKL an Urban Private Sector award this month from Preservation Oklahoma.

"The TulOil Building, to my knowledge, is the only small independent oil company building left in Tulsa," said Cathy Ambler, who serves on the Preservation Oklahoma board. "When I saw the owners come around to work on the windows, I had hoped that the building would not be torn down. It's a favorite place of mine."