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Renovate, Reuse, Rejoice

Architecture firm creates innovative home in bosom of the Pearl District

By Mike Easterling

Stacy Loeffler, one of the principals in BKL Incorporated, a local engineering and architectural firm that has been around since the 1940s, takes the view that if her company doesn't like the way Tulsa looks, it needs to take a direct approach to changing things.

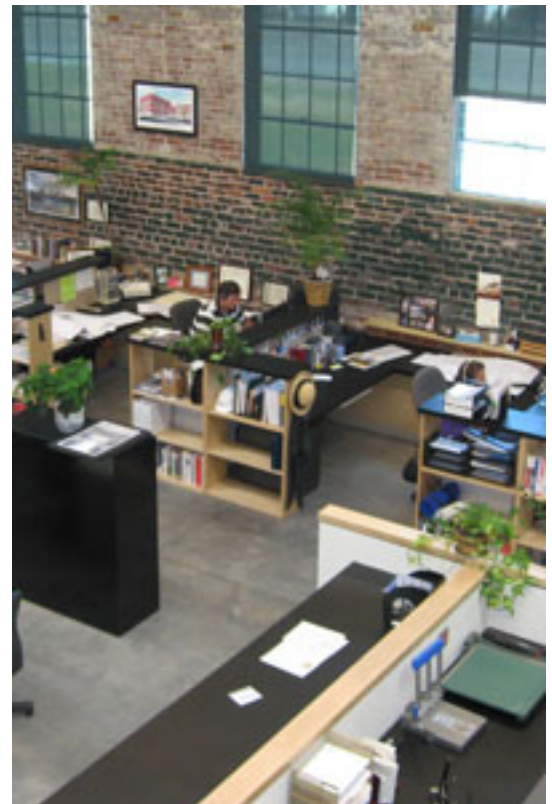
"We are architects, and we are the people who make a statement about where this city should be going," she said. "So why not do something we believe in?"

Loeffler's firm relocated late last year from its offices on Sheridan Road to a newly renovated space just east of downtown, taking up residence in an abandoned oil distribution center at 1623 E. 6th St. that had become a neighborhood eyesore. BKL bought the former TuOil Building in 2007, began its renovation in February 2008 and moved in 10 months later.

Now, the firm's staff is housed in an airy, sunny warehouse-like building that recently earned BKL officials an Urban Private Sector award from Preserve Oklahoma, a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving, protecting and promoting Oklahoma's historical and cultural landmarks. Preserve Oklahoma officials had considered the TuOil Building, constructed in 1923, one of the state's most endangered sites.

That's no longer true. While BKL officials opted not to seek historic status for the renovated building, they took pains to retain as much of the character of the structure as possible while at the same time converting it from an industrial use to one suitable for office work.

"We took a big space and managed not to screw it up," BKL president Kim Reeve said, joking about his firm's approach to renovating the building.



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It may not have been that simple, but Reeve and his partners didn't exactly set about giving the property a complete makeover, either. The building basically was recycled, an increasingly popular process known in architecture circles as adaptive reuse.

The most extensive changes were the construction of a new entry hall connecting the former TuOil office to the warehouse, the removal of a 42-inch warehouse floor that matched the height of the loading dock, and the creation of a 2,900-square-foot mezzanine. The entry hall includes a striking, two story glass wall that infuses the whole building with natural light.

BKL officials sought to make the building as sustainable as possible, installing efficient heating and air conditioning, energy-efficient lighting, skylights and roof insulation. The floor plan employs a large open area with work stations, while red brick walls, riveted steel tresses and unpainted ductwork are exposed. Even the former loading dock steel doors were salvaged, now serving as divider partitions on the mezzanine. The building's original corrugated tin roof was retained, but because it leaked, a new roof was built on top of it.

Substantial as those changes were, Reeve said the temptation to renovate the building from the ground up was easy to resist.

"The more time we spent in the building, the less we wanted to do to it," he said.

Building the Corridor

The project is a positive addition to an area that, while still struggling, could see dramatic change in the future. A proposal to construct a canal down the middle of 6th Street, surrounded by streets where pedestrians and motorists mix freely among bars, restaurants and boutiques, could put the new BKL headquarters in the middle of something strikingly different from its current environment.

The renovation has drawn raves from many of those who have seen it, including Jamie Jameson, a local developer and spokesman for the Pearl District Association, which includes 6th Street.

"It's certainly the kind of thing we like to see in the neighborhood, especially on 6th Street, which is the key corridor," he said, adding that he was pleased to see such a historic building rehabilitated.

"It's a good example of how you can bring things back," he said. "It shows that it's possible to transform something that looks old, crummy and decrepit back to new life."

Reeve and Loeffler both said the recent positive changes throughout the rest of the Pearl District contributed to their decision to buy the TuOil Building and renovate it.

"It would have been a lot more difficult decision to buy the building and put as much money in it as we did" if those changes hadn't been taking place, Loeffler said.

Reeve was more direct.

"Very probably, no," he said when asked if he would have supported the purchase of the building otherwise. "But it would have been very painful to let it go."

But Reeve pointed out the firm made a long-term investment by choosing the site it did, and he is confident the redevelopment of the surrounding area will validate the decision he and his partners made.

"Very much so," he said. "In any format, we don't care. We just know good things are going to happen there. We just want to see an environment where people can prosper. That's beginning to happen."

Loeffler insisted that visions of waterways and coffee houses one day populating an area that now is home to dingy auto body repair shops and weedy vacant lots is not some pie-in-the-sky dream.

"If that doesn't happen, [the Pearl District Association] will make something happen," she said.

In the meantime, Reeve, Loeffler and the BKL staff seem perfectly satisfied in their new location. Reeve, who commutes from Owasso, speaks enthusiastically about his easy access to Cherry Street's restaurants, City Hall, a variety of expressways and nearby Centennial Park, where many BKL staffers go to run or bike before returning to the firm's headquarters to take advantage of the new shower facilities that were built as part of the renovation.

"It's the end point," he said, explaining his thinking in moving his company to what amounts to an urban frontier. "What are you trying to accomplish? We saw the possibilities of being in this kind of environment. We saw tremendous opportunity here. If you talk to any of our employees, I think they'd say they're thrilled we're here in this kind of environment."

Jameson believes that's a growing sentiment. He points to a recent decision by Shelby and Rachel Navarro--co-owners of ONE Architecture, a firm that specializes in sustainable architecture--to move their office to 6th Street and Peoria Avenue, and the addition of another new architectural firm on 11th Street, as evidence that the district's potential is becoming increasingly obvious.

"It's great to see people who are in the business of visualizing things that aren't there moving in," he said. "They're always the first to come in. The fact that we're beginning to collect architects is wonderful testimony to the Pearl District Association's vision of the neighborhood."

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