

Builders save bits of the past

Developers learn to treat dug-up trash like treasure

JACK HAGEL, Staff Writer

A rusted Budweiser can. Some broken medicine bottles. A human skull.

Pieces of the past are unearthed almost daily at redevelopment projects across the Triangle.

Truthfully, most of it is trash.

But more and more, developers are treasuring it, using the old trinkets to attract bar hoppers, house hunters and office renters.

"It's not just about renovating a historic building, it's about re-creating the energy and excitement that was a part of downtown's past," said Michael Lemanski, the developer who turned the old Baldwin department store building on Durham's West Main Street into a dozen apartments last year.

Workers at the Baldwin found a rusty Rolodex-type file about the size of a car tire that contains detailed profiles of hundreds of former Baldwin customers dating back to the 1940s.

Lemanski wants to make the file part of the decor in a restaurant he hopes to lure to the Baldwin building. "What attracts people is spaces and objects that have character," he said. "So much of the built environment now is just cookie-cutter."

For now, the file is displayed in the lobby of the former Kress five-and-dime in Durham, which he also is renovating. Passers-by stop in to find their families. "There's 1,000 stories in that thing," Lemanski said.

Developers haven't always embraced their projects' histories. Of course, no one wants to be the chump who -- oops -- buries the original Magna Carta beneath luxury condominiums. But historic finds can mean time-consuming, money-losing archaeological digs.

That was John Bruckel's concern when local historians approached him in March.

Bruckel is building condominiums on Boylan Avenue in Raleigh on the site of Wake County's first courthouse. The property was once part of the estate of Joel Lane, who in the late 1700s offered up a chunk of his land so it could become what is now Raleigh. Historians and archaeologists, hoping for Lane artifacts, pressed Bruckel to dig.

Bruckel was apprehensive about cost and delays, until the city provided \$10,000 toward the dig.

At the site last month, a backhoe scraped earth as archaeologists from TRC Garrow clanged at rocks with metal tools and sifted dirt through a screen.

"We found part of a cow head," said Heather Olson, an archaeologist with the Chapel Hill company. "We've got the teeth and part of the jaw."

When someone discovered a ceramic tobacco pipe with a smiley face on the end, possibly from the late 1700s, Olson stamped her feet and shouted: "Very nice!"

The archaeologists dug up several hundred items, including specks of ceramic plates, a gold-plated button and a couple of bottles from the early 1800s.

Refreshing shift

Bruckel plans to donate the artifacts to the historians. He plans to include a catalog of the items in the lobby of the building.

Some historians and preservationists say this is a refreshing shift. Southerners may love their history, they say, but tend to do little to save it when it comes to new developments.

"In many cases, they'll go in and bulldoze it all and call it Heritage Point" -- before finding the heritage aspect, said Loretta Lautzenheiser, president of Coastal Carolina Research, a contract archaeology firm in Tarboro.

Some pooh-pooh the idea of using old stuff to market projects.

"Are you going to make any more money on a project because you found an old bottle?" asked Gregg Sandreuter, who is developing condominiums in Raleigh. "I'd probably say no."

But that doesn't stop developers from using the tack -- especially as projects in the Triangle's reawakening downtowns become more competitive.

"A lot of times, the developer has to create something from nothing," said Raleigh developer Greg Hatem. "It's always an advantage if the building or the land had a sense of place because it has a history."

Hatem recently opened The Raleigh Times Bar in the former offices of the defunct newspaper on Hargett Street in downtown Raleigh.

During renovation of the century-old building, workers unearthed old shoes, an empty condom package from the 1930s,

Several commercial restoration projects also are under way in Durham. These include the Baldwin Building at 107 West Main St. with loft apartments and the massive restoration of the American Tobacco and Liggett & Myers tobacco factories.

Properties that have been named to the National Register of Historic Places are eligible for both federal and state income tax credits, according to Tim Simmons, coordinator of the federal preservation tax credit program for income-producing structures with the State Historic Preservation office.

A federal income tax credit for the rehabilitation of historic structures is a 20 percent credit for the qualifying rehabilitation of income-producing historic properties.

Since 1998, North Carolina also has authorized a 20 percent credit for those taxpayers who receive the federal credit, providing investors with a combined 40 percent credit against eligible project costs.

The state also provides a 30 percent credit for the rehabilitation of non-income-producing historic properties, including private residences.

"Since 1976, more than 1,300 completed certified rehabilitation projects have been reviewed by our office," says Simmons. "This work represents an investment of more than \$500 million in historic projects."

Saad says he has applied for tax credits, but has not yet received final authorization.

The co-owner of Garner TV and Appliance, Saad and his older brother, Mones, purchased the 1914 brick building in March 2004 for \$135,000. After months of renovation and restoration, Sunny Side Oyster Bar Too opened in late May.

One of Saad's sons is moving into one of the four third-floor condominiums. An appraiser is locating in some of the commercial space on the second floor.

"This has always been the largest and nicest building in downtown Garner," says Saad. "I hope this is the start of the new era of downtown for Garner."

