



He has developed an edifice complex

By Chris Richter

From his sixth-floor office in the Masonic Temple Building, **Greg Hatem** has a front-row seat for downtown Raleigh's makeover. It's a change that Hatem, 46, helped start 11 years ago when his Empire Properties LLC bought and renovated an empty warehouse nearby. Empire now owns 36 buildings, with about 600,000 square feet of floor space, and is among downtown's largest landlords. By year-end, it will have invested more than \$50 million. Hatem's only title is manager, but he's the guiding force behind the 120-employee company.

He grew up in Roanoke Rapids and got a bachelor's in chemical engineering from N.C. State in 1985. Afterward, he went to China to visit his uncle, George Hatem, who had been Mao Zedong's personal physician and had become a public-health official. Once back in the U.S., Hatem spent a year helping close his family's clothing store before becoming a financial adviser at American Express. Back in China after his uncle died in 1988, he set up a foundation to continue the public-health work, then split the next seven years between Raleigh, where he ran a friend's advertising agency, and China, where he started a software company and built a 21-story building in Shenyang.

After he founded Empire with his brother and another investor in 1995, they turned an old warehouse into a Jillian's restaurant and bar. He then spent two years in China winding down his involvement with the software company and two in Raleigh working for the state in economic development.

He joined Empire full time in 1999. Some renovated buildings became restaurants, but he wants to build a hotel and condominiums near Memorial Auditorium.

For tenants who want an office in a steel-and-glass tower, Empire can't compete. But for those looking for something more retro, Hatem says, "it's an easy choice."