



An Empire of Restoration

As it has restored buildings in its home city of Raleigh, N.C., Empire Properties says it has operated with a staff that understands the 'sensitivity' required when working with historic structures.

BY ALAN DORICH

Through its revitalization of historic buildings in Raleigh, N.C., Empire Properties has not only preserved local landmarks, but also made significant contributions to the community, CEO Greg Hatem says. "A lot of what we have done here in Raleigh is economic development," he says, noting that the company has helped open businesses that create more jobs for local residents.

Empire Properties has focused on revitalizing its home city since its start. A graduate of North Carolina State University in Raleigh, Hatem founded the company in 1995 as a development firm. However, "We found that there wasn't anyone in the area that understood how to do adaptive reuse on historic structures," he recalls.

To adjust, Empire Properties slowly started its own construction company, Empire Hardhat Construction Inc., Hatem says. "After a couple of years, we had a full-fledged construction company of about 40 people," he remembers.

Today, the company also specializes in

property management, leasing and hospitality. Empire Properties has restored buildings with histories that go back as far as 1870.

In addition, "We self-perform a lot of our own demolition because it's so important not to overdo [it] when you're working with historic structures," he says. "What's tricky about it is that these are primarily historic tax credit projects. They have to be done through the Department of Interior Standards, which is through the federal government."

The last thing that Empire Properties wants to do is destroy the historic fabric of a building, Hatem notes. "Keeping the character of the buildings is at the heart of what we do; however, you're going to lose a lot of your funding if you don't qualify for tax credits," he says.

On The Same Page

Hatem carries more than 20 years of experience in real estate, finance and international business. He originally intended Empire Properties to be a side business while he operated a software company in Beijing, China. However, "In 1999, [I] was frustrated that revitalization wasn't mov-

Empire Properties

www.empire1792.com

Headquarters: Raleigh, N.C.

Employees: 160+

Specialty: Construction and development

Greg Hatem: "A lot of what we have done here in Raleigh is economic development."

ing faster," he recalls. After the company completed two projects, Hatem believed more would become involved in revitalizing Raleigh.

However, when more did not join in redeveloping Raleigh, Hatem decided to concentrate on Empire Properties full-time. "At the end of '99, I just focused exclusively on redeveloping buildings in downtown Raleigh," he says, noting that he has enjoyed the work. "I just absolutely love revitalizing downtown and working in old buildings.

"It's true for pretty much everybody in the company," he continues. "Everybody's on the same page, trying to bring back some of these grand buildings that are frighteningly close to being demolished and showing them off to the community.

"We've been fortunate to hire some incredibly talented craftsmen and project managers," he notes, adding that the company's staff includes David Goodman, who manages Empire Properties' construction company.

Hatem also highlights Superintendents Pat Rhyne and David Nicolay. "They understand how to [work] the construction

end, but at the same time, they understand the sensitivity of the historic buildings," Hatem says.

He also names Head Craftsman Kevin Hourihan, who is in charge of restoration.

Revitalizing The Raleigh Times

Hatem says Empire Properties' favorite project is its revitalization of the *Raleigh Times* newspaper building, which was originally built in 1906. "When we bought it, it was a wood shop," he remembers. "The front had been reconfigured beyond recognition."

In addition, "The roof hadn't been replaced in 50 years," he says, noting that the previous owners placed plastic on the second floor and let rainwater land there, acting as a second roof. "[When] we learned it was the old *Raleigh Times* newspaper [building], we thought it would be great to renovate the space into a restaurant or bar that could show off that history."


Empire Properties gutted the building, turning the upstairs level into a space where Hatem himself now lives. The lower level became a bar and restaurant that carries the newspaper's namesake.

While the company restored the building's original storefront, it also left some of the interior the way it found it, with such features as peeling plaster and aging wallpaper.

The company surrounded these features with a barrier of Plexiglas that adds to the atmosphere, Hatem says. "People try to over renovate buildings and try to make it look brand-new and you lose that character," he says. "Sometimes doing a minimal restoration is as important as doing a full restoration."

Staying Focused

Hatem predicts that Empire Properties will stay focused on historical projects. "We have such a good team in place for that," he says, noting that the company plans to bring its talents for revitalization to other markets, including the east coast of North Carolina. "We're expanding into doing some new construction in urban environments," he says, noting it is partnering with Wake County, N.C., on the development of Class-A office and retail space, as well as a 200-room hotel in downtown Raleigh. ■



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