

Q&A

Rosin Preservation practices what it teaches

BY KAREN ROTH RIDDER *Special to The Star*



JOHN SLEEZER jsleezer@kcstar.com Elizabeth Rosin followed the same standards that her clients use when she renovated the headquarters of Rosin Preservation, which was built in 1926. “We are just stewards of this building,” she says.

Rosin Preservation is walking the talk. The firm, which specializes in historic preservation documentation, recently restored a 1926 building in the east side of the Crossroads Arts District, turning it into its headquarters.

The brick structure at 17th and Holmes streets was originally part of a brass foundry. From the 1930s into the '60s, it was part of a machine shop. In recent years the building has stood vacant.

Now pulleys and beams that contributed to an industrial use remind owner Elizabeth Rosin and her staff they are only stewards of this historic space. It is a lesson she often teaches clients, and one they are now living.

Q: Q: What does your firm do?

A: A: We work with owners to preserve buildings in a couple of different ways. We work with developers who work with historic tax credits and help them go through the process, but we also work with communities and agencies that are using historic resources as a planning strategy.

For instance, we worked with the city of Smithville to create a historic district in their downtown as an economic development incentive. The district is not only helping preserve the qualities that make Smithville unique and attractive to visitors and to locals, but also providing access to incentives to help people fix up their buildings.

Q: Q: Was it challenging to do your own historic restoration project?

A: A: The process was really pretty straightforward. The building had been vacant for a while. We designed our project as if we were using historic tax credits. We wanted to hold ourselves to the same standards that our clients are held to.

There were some things we knew were going to be challenging, but we expected it. For instance, windows can be challenging, but we knew we wanted to match the industrial style of the historic windows. So we found a product that did that.

Q: Q: Why keep the old?

A: A: The preserved architectural features are part of the character of the building. They are part of its history. We are just stewards of this building. We didn't want to erase everything that had come before us. We just wanted to fix it to our needs until we are ready to move on and pass it to the next owners.

Q: Q: What is misunderstood about preservation?

A: A: I think taking the time to understand the building and what is important about it. Every building has its own history and its own story to tell. Sometimes I think there's a desire to fix everything and then move in.

Sometimes if you live with the house a little bit, you understand why things are the way they are, and there's a logic that becomes apparent that you might not realize initially. Something is oriented in a certain way, or a wall is in a certain place, or (there is) certain trim that you don't quite understand — there's a reason why.

Q: Q: How does someone assess whether an old building or home is worth restoring?

A: A: Anything can be rehabilitated. For enough money you can do anything, but you also have to have passion. When you go into an older building, there's a lot of craftsmanship that you don't see in newer buildings. That's what you want to focus your preservation energy and dollars on.

If you have wood trim, if you have brickwork, or if you have terra cotta, terrazzo or tile floors, or if you have a tile fireplace — these are elements that are going to be much harder to re-create today than if you were building a brand new house. They are part of the soul of the building, part of its intrinsic character. The vast majority of the time these elements can be retained and repaired.

Q: Q: Are all building rehabilitations the same?

A: A: There are three main levels of preservation.

The preservation restoration standard is the highest level in which you keep all the historic fabric of a building intact and restore everything back to the way it was originally designed. This is generally used for a museum house or a building that was very important.

The middle level is rehabilitation where you are adapting a building for a modern use, but you understand what elements define its historic character and you make sure you preserve those elements. This is what we have done with our building.

The third standard is renovation where you can take the shell of the building and do whatever you want inside without really much thought about what the historic elements are. This kind of renovation is a full adaptation to a modern aesthetic as well as function.

Q: Q: What is the biggest mistake people make either in a business or their own home?

A: A: Replacing historic wood windows is the single biggest mistake people make. If properly maintained, a historic wood window can last forever. They are made with old-growth wood, so they are much more durable than any new product on the market.

Deteriorated wood can be repaired. It can be consolidated to last longer. If the window isn't functioning properly, the pulleys can be balanced. It can be unstuck. A window that is painted shut is not beyond repair. All of those qualities can be corrected.

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