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Living high downtown

Old bank building redeveloped into Missouri's tallest apartment complex

By Kevin Collison



Developer Glenn Solomon is on top of the world — or at least the 31st floor of what officially became Missouri's tallest apartment building last weekend.

"It's so exciting to be able to bring this back to life and have people appreciate it," Solomon said Tuesday.

"I can't really call it the beacon for the revitalization of downtown, but it's one of the many beacons saying downtown is back."

On the floors beneath, the once empty and tired Fidelity National Bank & Trust Building, a twin-topped landmark on the downtown skyline since 1931, was beginning to accept new residents in its new incarnation as 909 Walnut.

Solomon and his company, Simbol Commercial, received the certificate of occupancy Friday after a \$64 million redevelopment project.

There is still some interior work to complete and the bamboo has not started growing yet in the 16,000-square-foot roof garden atop an adjacent parking garage, but Solomon is nearing the end of a towering challenge he took on in February 2000.

That's when he bought the 35-story building at Ninth and Walnut streets with an eye toward returning it to office use. It had been empty since 1995 when the last federal office workers moved out — leaving its once ornate public spaces encased in bureaucratic drywall and dropped ceilings.

The office idea was not going anywhere when Solomon, who lives in Dallas, hooked up with Kimberly-Clark Corp. in early 2002. The Dallas-based corporate giant, better known for paper products such as Kleenex, had a wholly owned subsidiary called Housing Horizons LLC that was doing big historic renovation projects around the country.

Together, they approached the city with the idea of not only renovating the historic bank building, but also redeveloping the entire east side of Walnut between Ninth and 10th streets.

The plan called for demolishing the old Columbia National Bank Building at 915 Walnut St., replacing it with a parking garage and also renovating the former Title Building, a seven-story building at 929 Walnut St.

After lengthy negotiations with UMB Bank to acquire the Columbia National property, Solomon approached the city for what were unprecedented tax breaks to

do the ambitious project. He wanted 100 percent property tax abatement for 25 years, as opposed to the usual city policy of 100 percent for 10 years and 50 percent for the remaining 15.

"The incentives were critical to the success of the project," said Mayor Kay Barnes, who praised the building as an important part of the city's history. "The spinoff effects for the rest of the neighborhood of that building being back in use will be substantial."

In return for the incentives, Solomon and Kimberly-Clark were prepared to invest \$18.6 million in the project. This was early 2003, before the Sprint Center arena and new Power & Light District projects had been proposed, and downtown was still in the early stages of what has become a \$2.5 billion redevelopment boom.

"The reason I thought the project would be a success was because of the building," Solomon said. "Even before everything was going on downtown, we thought it was a unique property."

The art deco tower, designed by Kansas City architects Holt Price & Barnes, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It also was the sixth-tallest skyscraper in Kansas City.

As a precaution, the developers, fearful of the negative connotation from the still fresh memory of the terrorist attacks of 2001, also asked for the building to have its address changed from 911 Walnut St. to 909 Walnut St.

The Kansas City Council signed off on the deal, and work began in earnest in mid-2003. The Weitz Co.'s office in Overland Park was selected as contractor for the renovation and construction of the 323-space garage.

"I think this building is still going to do what we originally told the city," Solomon said. "It's going to attract the urban dweller who can afford to support the restaurants and retail."

The building has 159 luxury apartments, 55 of which have been leased so far. Monthly rents range from \$750 to \$2,500.

There are also two penthouses, one of which was sold for \$600,000. The second penthouse is a three-level, 4,200-square-foot space that occupies the north tower of the building. It's still available, for \$1.2 million.

The lower four floors of the Fidelity building are available for commercial and retail use. The first major tenant, Perfect Commerce, began moving its employees into the 19,000-square-foot space last weekend. The online commerce company occupies what was once the old bank's lobby, a soaring space that had to be reclaimed from a federal remodeling job that had converted it to two floors.

Now the original ornate ceiling is revealed two stories above the work floor. It includes a huge wheel of the zodiac that will ring a chandelier that is scheduled to be installed later this month. Between the 909 Walnut and 929 Walnut buildings, the project includes 70,000 square feet of office space

Solomon is hopeful a restaurant operator will be found for part of the first floor of 909 Walnut soon. The corner of 929 Walnut also is available for retail use, perhaps as a wine bar or coffee shop.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the project is the rooftop garden atop the garage, seven floors above Walnut Street. The developers are describing the 16,000-square-foot garden as one of the largest in the Midwest.

The center features a 110-foot by 60-foot "Great Lawn" ringed by a crushed granite walkway that includes individual garden spaces featuring bamboo, roses and other flowers.

The garden will include a small lawn for dog walking and a series of shaded, private cabanas where residents can have some outdoor privacy. Jeffrey L. Bruce & Co. designed the rooftop garden.

"The purpose of this space is to give someone the feel of having a yard, a sort of suburban lifestyle, but in an urban setting," Solomon said.

The project also includes a fitness center in the former safe-deposit vault of the old bank.

Kimberly-Clark executives could not be reached. But Len Anderson, vice president and chief operating officer of Housing Horizons, said his firm was pleased to be involved in the revival of downtown.

"We are also proud of the 909 Walnut redevelopment and the integrity of the renovation process, which has sensitively restored and preserved the significant architectural features of this historic Kansas City landmark," Anderson said.

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