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Chillicothe's historic Carlisle Building gets new life The long-abandoned downtown structure undergoes \$10 million restoration

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The Carlisle Building in Chillicothe is making a comeback after a fire gutted it in 2003. Adena Health System will be using it for office space and housing for students in its graduate medical program.



By **Holly Zachariah**

The Columbus Dispatch • Monday October 19, 2015 8:06 AM

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CHILLICOTHE, Ohio — The roof had collapsed, the charred walls had caved, the water-damaged floors had rotted away, and the windows were mostly gone. And don't even try to imagine the mess left by the host of birds and vermin that occupied the decaying, historic building for a decade.

“It was a scary building,” Ty McBee said as he stood inside the Carlisle Building last week. “Certainly, this was a building you didn't want to be inside.”

But that was then, after a fire accidentally set by two teenagers in April 2003 gutted the four-story, Romanesque-style building that since 1885 has covered a downtown block.

Now, after a three-year, \$10 million project, the Carlisle will reopen today with office space for Adena Health System on the first floor and 32 urban-loft apartments for the medical students in the hospital's physician residency programs on the other three.

On the National Register of Historic Places, the Carlisle is easily identifiable by the trademark tower that juts more than 100 feet into the sky and its fancy mansard dormer windows. It's prime real estate at the heart of the town square, across from the Ross County Courthouse in a city rich with history because it was Ohio's first capital.

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Preservationists say the project stands as an example of how to do everything right when it comes to saving architecturally and historically significant landmarks.

"Their formula works: Use what you have, embrace it, rehab it and make it a symbol of your community's identity," said Amanda Terrell, director of the State Historic Preservation Office of the Ohio History Connection.

"Especially in these small towns like Chillicothe, people identify where they are with what's around them, and nothing there is more dominant than the Carlisle Building."

In the 12 years since the fire, the building has been through multiple owners and was headed for a sheriff's sale more than once. Five developers and more contractors than anyone could track have walked away as ideas to save it slipped away as quickly as they came.

But then a few years ago, Adena executives got serious about finding a way to invest in downtown Chillicothe, said McBee, the health system's business development director.

"People who understood the project knew there was no Plan B," McBee said. "It was now or never because that building was in such decay that it was almost past the point of no return."

So Adena found Michael Chesler and his Chesler Group out of Cleveland, who had a reputation for rehabilitating buildings that others considered a lost cause.

Chesler had never done a project such as this one before, though, which he called a rehabber's perfect storm: The building had been burned, abandoned and neglected.

"I'd done projects that fell into two of those categories, but never all three," Chesler said. "But I walked through and said, 'This is the perfect building for me.'"

Figuring out how to fund it, though, is a puzzle that people in many communities with blighted historic buildings can't solve, Terrell said.

"People see big buildings empty for so long, and they can no longer see the possibilities," she said. "It takes a lot of imagination to see what it could be, and it takes even more ingenuity to bring all the parties together to make that happen."

As the developer, that was Chesler's job. He paid \$350,000 for the building and then secured a conventional bank loan; a \$1 million loan and a \$500,000 grant from the state's JobsOhio; a \$500,000 loan from the Chillicothe-Ross Community Foundation; received state and federal historic tax credits; and used his own money to finish the project.

Adena officials could not provide a figure for what the hospital has invested so far. They have committed to at least a 15-year lease with an option to buy the building from Chesler after five years.

Chesler said he saw the potential in the building from the start but also saw how critical it was to the psyche of the community.

"The Carlisle Block Building, that blight in the center of town, represented a failure every time anyone looked at it. It said to everyone, 'We can't fix our problems here,'" he said. "Now, it represents success."

Mark Shuter, CEO of Adena Health System, said the building will offer the hospital's medical students a hip and cool place to stay (the apartments reflect the architecture, with one even having a room in the tower, and the building's basement with its exposed brick will be transformed with bicycle racks) but also will provide a shot in the arm to Chillicothe's downtown.

"Everybody was sick and tired of hearing about this building and its failure. It was a defeating conversation for Chillicothe," Shuter said. "Now, this is a flywheel of excitement. Adena was committed to making sure we no longer had a scar in the middle of downtown."

A ribbon cutting is set for noon today, with public tours following until 2 p.m. The Carlisle is at 9 S. Paint St.

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