

A fire last week has brought attention to efforts to restore a once-bustling Richmond community.

REBIRTH ON BROAD STREET



DEAN HOFFMEYER/TIMES-DISPATCH

Trai Harris shoots pool in the upstairs room of Popkin Tavern, which opened in an old Broad Street furniture store in October.

BY JOE MACENKA AND OLYMPIA MEOLA

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITERS

There's a movement growing on West Broad Street in Richmond, amid boarded-up storefronts and littered alleys where the homeless rummage through trash bins.

One by one, developers are leveling or renovating buildings that once helped form the core of a shopping and dining destination along a five-block stretch of West Broad, and turning them into art galleries, restaurants, offices, apartments and shops.

The goal, according to those who work and live there, is to breathe life into a formerly bustling commercial corridor that has been sitting largely stagnant for years, caught between two of Richmond's more prominent development hot spots.

The efforts to restore the neighborhood came into focus last Sunday when an abandoned building at 323 W. Broad broke out into a three-alarm fire that gutted the building and caused significant damage to a pair of neighboring businesses.

Sound of Music, at 321 W. Broad St., had equipment damage that could total in the hundreds of thou-

sands of dollars. The 1708 Gallery at 319 W. Broad St. had water damage in the basement and a dusting of soot on the art works.

"It's such a shame," said Kathy Emerson, who operates Quirk Gallery at 311 W. Broad St. "Those are two of our best neighbors. You hate to see something like that happen to such good people."

The neighborhood is sandwiched. Immediately to the west is Virginia Commonwealth University, which is mushrooming into one of the fastest-growing campuses in the nation.

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REBIRTH ON BROAD STREET

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Broad

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To the east, the Greater Richmond Convention Center, VCU Medical Center and building projects by federal, state and local governments are putting a new face on the East Broad Street corridor.

In between, a hardy group of artists and entrepreneurs is taking hold, laying what it believes will be the foundation for a renaissance along West Broad. They are banding together as the Broad Street Corridor Coalition to address common concerns for the neighborhood.

It's like everyone's sitting at the starting line, waiting to see who's going to step on the gas pedal first," said Kevin W. Korda, who in January opened Renovation Resources, a home renovation and fixtures store, at 18 W. Broad St.



One reason that renaissance is slow to take shape is because so many properties sit either fully or partly empty and in a state of disrepair. Richmond's records show that along the six blocks of West Broad between Foushee and Belvidere streets, 26 properties are classified as abandoned, although in many cases, the city has not verified those findings.

The city in October published a list of abandoned properties that now includes more than 2,800 locations. Eight of the buildings listed for that stretch of West Broad belong to Central Business District Apartments LLC.

Ron Hunt, managing member, said the city sent him a notice about six months ago listing several of Central Business District's properties on West Broad as vacant, and asking him to board them up.

"So I sent it back and said I have 104 apartments in these buildings. I never heard back from them," he said. "If you went by there, they look vacant. The four or five stories above them are full of people."

Hunt's company bought more than eight properties along that stretch starting about four years ago, including 27 W. Broad St., where upscale eatery 27 Restaurant is located. Hunt converted several of the buildings' upper floors into apartments, but the retail tenants for the street level have been harder to come by.

"What we probably did was make the mistake and [not] finish them off," Hunt said. "So when people go by to look at them and see all the work that has to be done, that probably hurt us a little bit."

The company is working out leases with two new tenants, and plans to renovate other street-level retail spaces to make them more fetching.

City Building Commissioner Art Dahlberg said the Vacant Property Registry was assembled using several methods, from checking to see whether a building had active utilities accounts to visually inspecting a structure to see if it was abandoned or unoccupied.

A list of about 3,200 structures was compiled, and letters were sent to the registered owners of the properties. If the city received no response from the owner, the property was kept on the list. After the letters were sent out, the city received roughly 600 challenges to their placement on the registry, roughly 400 of which the city considers to be valid, leaving 2,800 buildings on the list.

"I'm sure there are people who deserved to be on it when we



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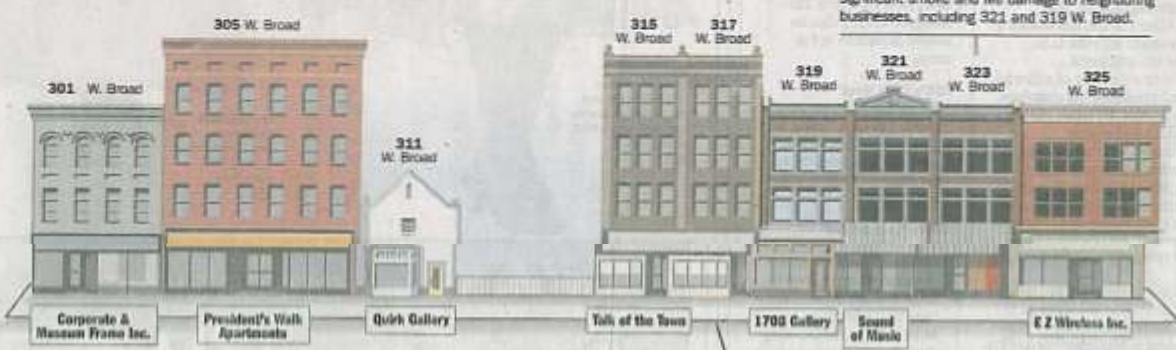
KEVIN W. KORDA
OWNER, RENOVATION RESOURCES

LEFT: Comfort is a popular restaurant on West Broad Street near the former Popkin Furniture building.

DAVE HOFFMEYER/TIMES DISPATCH

Broad Street snapshot

Last Sunday's fire affected several buildings on the south side of the 300 block of West Broad Street. Here's a look at the other tenants that share the block.



March 11: A three-alarm fire, which begins in a partially abandoned building at 323 W. Broad, causes significant smoke and fire damage to neighboring businesses, including 321 and 319 W. Broad.

Abandoned or thriving?

In spite of city records showing 26 properties classified as abandoned along Broad Street between Foushee and Belvidere streets, many new restaurants, galleries and cafes are bringing a rebirth to the area. Here are some examples:

- 1 Art 6 6 E. Broad
- 2 27 Restaurant 27 W. Broad
- 3 Popkin Tavern 121 W. Broad
- 4 Turnstyle 102 W. Broad
- 5 Comfort 200 W. Broad
- 6 Visual Art Studio 206 W. Broad
- 7 Lift Coffee Shop 218 W. Broad
- 8 ada gallery 328 W. Broad
- 9 Nick's Produce & International Market 400 W. Broad



HILEY MADDOX/TIMES DISPATCH

started last year who don't deserve to be on it anymore," the commissioner said.

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Bayou Properties LLC, which owns the building that burned, had been notified by the city at least twice in 30 days that the structure was not properly secured and needed repair, according to the city's building commissioner. The company did not respond to the city.

Bayou owner Oliver C. Lawrence has said he did not receive the notices but vowed to address violations at his properties if the city would work with him.

"Those are the people we're trying to motivate," said Korda, sitting in a front office at Renovation Resources, an intricately renovated brick building at the end of a block that has three abandoned structures. "Hopefully, we can motivate them to make it a better neighborhood."

Korda's shop offers unique tiles, sinks, faucets and other fixtures, and he elected to adorn the walls with water colors, photographs and other artwork. He keeps the store open for First Fridays, the immensely popular tours that routinely draw hordes of people to the neighborhood's art galleries on the first Friday night of

each month.

Korda said the decision by various artists to open galleries in the neighborhood is the prime reason for West Broad's renaissance.

"The galleries were probably the leaders of the drive," he said. "Once the arts come, the rest follows."

Backed by investors, Emerson opened Quirk Gallery less than two years ago, joining a group of galleries on West Broad that already includes 1708, ada gallery, Cornerstone Gallery and Visual Art Studio. Several other galleries are on adjoining streets.

"There's a tremendous solidarity and feeling that great things are going to happen and we're going to go forward," Emerson said.

The solidarity is carrying over into the formation in recent months of the Broad Street Corridor Coalition. The group has its first formal meeting planned for Tuesday. Area business operators said city officials have been coop-

■ Developers see historic gems, much potential along Hull Street. Real Estate, Page 12

■ Take a look at Broad Street revitalization and hear commentary about the work in progress. TimesDispatch.com

erative, and several of those officials have been invited to meet with them Tuesday over breakfast at 27 Restaurant.

Business operators in the neighborhood have identified several concerns, including crime, the abundance of bus stops and the glut of loading zones. They also would like to do something to spruce up the vacant street-level storefronts. Many have their windows covered either with yellowing paper, dirty shades or drab paint.

Emerson suggested enlisting VCU art students to devise ways to brighten the windows of empty storefronts.

"This city is rife with remarkable artistic talent," she said. "We'd like to kind of figure out a way where you have these kind of gaping-tooth looks enhanced with something more appealing."

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Lt. Gary Ladin oversees city police coverage of the neighborhood

and is heralded by the local shop owners for his attention to their concerns. The native Richmonder keeps a picture of a bustling Broad Street in 1935 on his desk.

"There are thousands and thousands and thousands of people just walking up and down Broad Street," he said. "Everybody's got a bag in their hand, that means they were shopping. That's my inspiration — to get Broad Street back to that."

Any image of the area as crime-ridden is based largely on perception, Ladin said. A few service centers in the area for homeless make that neighborhood a congregation point, he said, but the neighborhood does not suffer from a violent crime problem compared with other parts of the city.

"I do believe they're responsible for some of the nonviolent crime" and quality-of-life issues, he said, such as littering, cursing and urinating in public. But generally, as the number of people frequenting the area rises, the crime

will fall, he said.

Vacant buildings are an issue because they often provide desired shelter.

"It is a problem, if they're left vacant and they're not boarded up, they're not secure. Then that's nothing more than a haven for illegal, illicit activities," he said.

Richmond community development officials contacted for this story deferred to Linwood Norman, Mayor L. Douglas Wilder's spokesman. Norman did not return phone calls left over a three-day period.

Thanks to people like James Robinson, who one day last week was sweeping up tiny pieces of trash on the sidewalk in front of his employer, the Empire Theater, the walkways are relatively clean. But it takes only a slight breeze carrying the smell of urine to indicate what lies behind some of the facades.

Tufts of vegetation sprouting through the cobblestone alleyways collect shrapnel from the

night's activity. Broken glass, men's underwear, gutted furniture, cigarette packs, feces, makeshift beds, campfire remains, empty liquor bottles and food wrappers litter the alleys, which serve as encampments for homeless and roaming grounds for various others.

The shopkeepers say some of that is par for the course when living in the city. Others are just trying to clean up the neighborhood, one step at a time, and restore West Broad to its glory days of yesteryear.

"Alleys are alleys," Korda said. "We'll start from the front of the street and work our way back. We're kind of in triage right now."

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