
Gainesville Remembered: Built to last

Putting old buildings to new use in downtown Gainesville.

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Along West University Avenue, as in other parts of Gainesville, old buildings are being torn down and replaced with larger, more modern structures. Meanwhile, in downtown Gainesville, a humble historic preservation revolution is quietly unfolding.

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For 30 years, Elmo and Lupe Moser operated the Sovereign restaurant in a renovated livery stable and carriage house at 12 SE Second Ave. A photograph from 1974 shows the building with a large stable door intact. The Mosers installed a window with lace curtains in place of the door.

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The architecture of the building, along with Chef Elmo's European-inspired dishes, made it a favorite place to celebrate special occasions.

In 2006, the Sovereign closed. Several other businesses opened in the building, but the interior remained largely unchanged. Two years ago, the building was transformed into Mojo Hogtown Bar-B-Que. Joyner Construction literally opened up the restaurant, injecting a modern feel into the building while also preserving its historic character.

Project Manager Ryland Wagner says Joyner removed large sections of drywall to expose the original Campville brick, sandblasted the ceiling beams with walnut shells and lightened the ceiling so the original features of the building could be seen again.

"We tried to keep it as period as possible," Wagner says. "These are the kind of projects that help you make your mark on Gainesville."

Wagner's father, Richard Wagner, is president of Joyner Construction. The father-son team is leaving a legacy of historical rehabilitation projects in both Gainesville and Ocala, including working simultaneously on the renovation of two former Melting Pot restaurants.

Hope Meucci opened Gainesville's Melting Pot fondue restaurant in 1982 in the former

Gainesville Gospel Tabernacle at 418 E. University Ave. In 2016, the building was transformed into the Matheson Library & Archives.

According to architect Jay Reeves, chair of the city of Gainesville Historic Preservation Board, the building was approximately two years away from needing to be demolished due to exposure to the elements, water damage and structural issues. Before construction could begin on the building, which was constructed on a filled creek bed, the foundation had to be stabilized. "You could put a marble on the floor and it would roll toward the creek bed," Reeves recalls.

After the building was stabilized with piers, the sunken floors that were installed when the former tabernacle became the Melting Pot were removed. Due to damage to the original wood flooring, heart pine flooring from Goodwin Company was installed. Original and period materials were used in this adaptive reuse project, and an innovative fire suppression system was added that removes the oxygen from the air to put out a fire without water, thereby protecting the contents of the library and archives. The Matheson Library & Archives adaptive reuse was also completed by Joyner Construction.

Another recent Joyner Construction project, the Firestone Building at 304 W. University Ave., was on the verge of being condemned by the city before it was rescued by Phoebe Cade Miles and her husband, Richard Miles. The building maintains many of the original features, including a window at the front entrance with the original Firestone logo still visible, some of the original flooring and Campville brick. In 2015, the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation recognized the project with an Honorable Mention in the adaptive use category.

Despite these recent successes, Reeves cautions that downtown Gainesville's historic buildings are in need of protection. "The biggest hurdle is that there is no historic preservation district in downtown Gainesville," he says.

The downtown area borders three historic districts, the Northeast Historic District (better known as the Duck Pond), the Southeast Historic District and the Pleasant Street Historic District.

Historic preservation can actually fuel economic development, Reeves stresses, especially downtown. "It's one of the best tools to redevelopment that you have."

Captions:

The Firestone building in the 1920s, when the Seagle Building's construction was stalled, and after Joyner Construction rehabilitated it nearly a century later.

Mojo Hogtown Bar-B-Que features open-air seating, restored windows and more original building features compared to the time when the building was the Sovereign restaurant, which offered fine dining in Gainesville from 1976 to 2006.

The Gainesville Gospel Tabernacle (pictured in the 1930s), which was the Melting Pot fondue restaurant from 1982 to 2009, is now home to the Matheson Library & Archives.

The 1886 sanctuary at First United Methodist Church was restored to its original glory in 2013, including the return of a bell tower with a functioning bell that is over 100 years old.