



PHOTO BY BEN CLINE

The Dels Corp renovated a vacant, dilapidated building in downtown Mountain Home and constructed a vibrant new restaurant, Rio Burrito, in its place.

The virtuous cycle of adaptive reuse

By Greta Hacker

At the local level, it's exciting to see a new project break ground. Some of the most well-known economic development success stories in the state are projects that created something where nothing was before: a new hotel, a new restaurant, a new factory.

But over time, these exciting new buildings become old and can eventually become vacant when their original use is no longer relevant for the community's needs. Recently, the Lincoln Land Institute called vacancies in the United States an "epidemic" and Arkansas is not immune to this disease. Instead of viewing these buildings as eyesores, we should view them as opportunities to be catalysts for renewal, growth and community revitalization.

Adaptive reuse, the process of revitalizing an existing building for a purpose other than what it was originally designed for, is an answer to this problem. Arkansas has seen many incredible adaptive reuse projects in larger cities, including the Momentary in Bentonville (a former cheese factory turned into contemporary art space) and the Bakery District in Fort Smith (a former baked goods facility turned into a retail, coworking, restaurant and community space).

According to Ryan Biles, Lonoke 2022 Executive Committee member and owner of Kudzu Collective (kudzucollective.design), an architectural firm that

specializes in adaptive reuse, these types of projects have been gaining momentum in the United States. Recent data from the American Institute of Architectural Billing Index found that renovation and adaptive reuse projects now outpace new construction and comprise over 50 percent of the value of construction dollars spent.

Although adaptive reuse projects have clear economic benefits, Biles suggests that they can have far deeper positive impacts on a community. "The value of [adaptive reuse] to a community is certainly quantifiable, in terms of healthy lease rates and property, sales and A&P tax revenues," he says. "But it is also a qualitative value, one where citizen perception shifts from 'we could never' to 'look what we did!' That contagious positivity—or "defiant optimism" as we call it in Lonoke—makes a huge impact on the mindset of a small town or neighborhood."

Adaptive reuse projects happen in communities of all sizes, and some of the examples mentioned occurred in large and more affluent cities. However, the inspiring effects of renewal can be particularly helpful for under-resourced and rural areas. One organization is working in some of the most rural communities in the state to turn forgotten places into affordable and eco-conscious housing while taking a community-centric approach.

The Dels Corp (www.thedelscorp.com) was founded in 2018 by Mark Bertel in Mountain Home with the goal of providing sustainable, multi-family housing throughout Arkansas and the Midwest. It all started with a property called The Dels, which was once known as Town & Country Motor Inn, one of Mountain Home's original motels. With a great location just a few blocks from downtown, there was a lot of potential to breathe new life into this property and provide value to the citizens of Mountain Home. The Dels offers affordable, all-inclusive studio apartments with a strong community-based feel.

Since The Dels Corp's original success in Mountain Home, Bertel and his team have renovated 11 properties in north central Arkansas and southern Missouri and have launched two restaurants. Although each property has unique features and its own unique story, each of them share a community-centered focus.

"Before we even think about purchasing a property for renovation, we make sure that we develop close partnerships with multiple stakeholders in that community," says Hannah Thaxton, operations manager at The Dels Corp. "It is very important to us to build a presence in a city and to make sure that our project is something that the community needs and wants."

Some of the ways The Dels Corp reports involving themselves in communities prior to beginning an adaptive reuse project include joining local chambers of commerce, partnering with local schools and sponsoring events such as 5Ks and festivals.

Thaxton shares this piece of advice for leaders thinking about adaptive reuse in their own communities: "Don't be scared of the big run-down projects, because they are usually the ones that bring the most joy. People are often thankful when something old is made new, beautiful and useful."

Biles echoes that suggestion. "I encourage folks to think about the worst or most embarrassing building in their community and be willing to ask 'what if?' Most of us have driven through a dusty downtown or walked by an old, dark building and said, 'I sure wish somebody would do something about that...' or 'Why doesn't somebody clean that place up.' I simply remind people that you can be that somebody!" 🏡



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