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Jim Schlosser: Team looks at restoring architectural features

GREENSBORO -- Everyone loves intrigue. With curious anticipation, Dave Hill awaits the outcome of the first episode of "Radical Renewal."

Hill and his wife, Judi, own and live upstairs in a commercial building at 233 S. Elm St. Their business, Thousands of Prints, occupies the first floor.

The Hills bought the then-empty building in 1974. Bare sidewalks and empty storefronts defined Elm Street.

When the Hills arrived, they shared downtown Greensboro with Al Faber and his family, who had just moved into a commercial building in the same block. The families pioneered the return of people living downtown and predicted many would follow.

"It just didn't come as fast we thought it would, but when it did happen it came all at one bunch," Hill says of the recent downtown renaissance that has brought new restaurants, bars, retail shops, a ball park and people living in condominiums and apartments.

In keeping with the spirit of downtown renewal, the Hills said "yes" when Action Greensboro asked if a team of volunteers could, on the weekend of Oct. 28-30, rip away the facade of the couple's beloved 117-year-old building.

The team wants to see what's behind the facade.

The Hills' building will be the starting point of an Action Greensboro project called "Radical Renewal." It intends to restore or expose architectural features original to old downtown buildings.

The Hills long have known their building's facade isn't original. The building, at South Elm and Washington streets, dates to 1888; that was an era when contractors dressed up buildings with arches, columns, cornices and other fancy touches.

The building's first occupant was the North Carolina Steel and Iron Co., which went bust after the iron ore it intended to mine turned out to be of poor quality.

Cone Mills, which built factories on land intended for ore mining, placed its sales office in the steel and iron company's building downtown.

After Cone moved its office elsewhere downtown, Greensboro National Bank became the

building's anchor tenant.

One section stood three stories with an angular main entrance that faced the Elm-Washington intersection and extended a good ways down Washington. The other section had two floors and faced Elm.

Both the three- and two-story sections featured granite pieces that formed arches over the windows and entrances.

In 1917, the arches disappeared during a renovation of the bank building. A new facade that featured columns was added to the three-story section.

The two-story section remained attached to the bank building but in essence became a separate structure with a bland commercial facade. A 1920 photo shows an awning across the front and a sign for a tailoring business.

Later, the widening of Washington caused the bank building to be demolished, but the section that became the Hills' building survived.

Various tenants occupied the building before the Hills, with the last and probably longest being a Singer Sewing Machine store.

The Hills wonder about that original arch. Was it covered over in the 1917 renovation or torn out?

"It may be there. We just don't know," Dave Hill says.

The Radical Renewal team will find out late next month.

Benjamin Briggs, executive director of Preservation Greensboro and chairman of Action Greensboro's Radical Renewal Committee, believes the arch is gone.

He bases this on investigation by Tom Hayes, an engineer with Sutton-Kennerly & Associates.

If Briggs is right, no problem. The Radical Renewal team will build an arch exactly like the old one. It will restore or repair features that remain from the original facade.

Briggs says the work can be completed in a weekend.

After the Hills' building, the team will move on to another downtown project that hasn't yet been named.

Briggs doesn't expect the project to expose dazzling facades long covered up. Much of that kind of work was done during the last two decades, with a notable example being the Dixie Building at South Elm and February One Place.

Built in the early 1900s, the Dixie was renovated in the early 1980s. Off came an unattractive metal facade erected in the 1950s to make a woman's apparel shop on the ground floor look modern.

The removal exposed the Dixie's original and beautiful granite facade.

Briggs expects the Radical Renewal team will work mainly on facades already exposed with an aim "to restore color and architectural features" removed long ago.

There's plenty to do. During the early 1980s renovation, Briggs says, original cornices and capitals weren't restored, and some windows didn't match originals.

Dabney Sanders, of Action Greensboro, says Radical Renewal's goal is to make downtown look even better and to educate people about restoration.

"We are hoping people will get inspired to do it on their own," she says.

The beauty of Radical Renewal is it won't cost anybody money.

Engineers, architects and builders are volunteering their time on the Hills building' construction materials also will be donated. Action Greensboro intends to use volunteer teams and donated supplies for other projects.

Staff writer Jim Schlosser reports Mondays on interesting places and people in the Triad. Contact him at 373-7081 or jschlosser@news-record.com

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Action Greensboro has a plan to restore or expose architectural features original to old downtown buildings, including this one at 233 S. Elm St.

Want to help?

Dabney Sanders of Action Greensboro asks anyone who wants to assist with the Radical Renewal project to call her at 379-0821.

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