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Flat Iron rehab presses on

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GRAND RAPIDS — One local law firm plans to add some life to a prominent yet long-neglected corner building in downtown Grand Rapids.

The building at the intersection of Monroe Center and Ottawa Avenue will soon house about 100 employees, including 50 attorneys from the firm **Smith Haughey Rice & Roegge**. The law firm will take up about 26,600 square feet on the upper three floors of the 31,500-square-foot project, which involves combining the adjacent Flat Iron, Herkner and Groskopf buildings.

TbL **Locus Development** acquired the property three or four years ago and has been marketing it ever since, but the company knew it would take a tenant that could see through the challenges of the dilapidated building to the property's true potential, said Chuck Hoyt, VP of development at Locus.

"We're passionate about the downtown and this neighborhood. Because of (the building's) presence and importance to the neighborhood, ... we're happy to make this a success," Hoyt told *MiBiz*. Locus is continuing to market the 1,100 square feet of retail space on the sidewalk level of the Flat Iron Building.

The total development cost for the project is \$5.6 million, Hoyt said.

Jack DeBruin, principal at architecture firm **Design Plus**, said SHRR had contacted his company to help the firm evaluate its current space as well as identify options for a new office.

"They wanted to be on a corner of downtown, and they enjoyed the character, ...rawness and quality of the

FYI

Flat Iron Building

- Upper three floors to house Smith Haughey Rice & Roegge
- Developer: Locus Development
- Contractor for interior: Wolverine Building Group
- Architect for interior: Design Plus
- Contractor for exterior: Orion Construction
- Architect for exterior: Cornerstone Architects
- Pursuing LEED for Core and Shell and Interiors
- 31,500 square feet
- Total development: \$5.6 million



Matt Zimmerman of Wolverine Building Group, Jon Siebers of Smith Haughey Rice and Roegge and Chuck Hoyt of Locus Development stand in a future office for one of the SHRR attorneys to show off the wall murals unveiled as crews worked on the interior space. The project has plans for a roof-top deck and will bring a modern look to the law firm's Grand Rapids headquarters.

PHOTO: JOE BOOMGAARD. COURTESY RENDERINGS

space, and they ended up landing there," DeBruin said.

Chad Gould, the architect at Design Plus who handled the design of SHRR's interior project, said much of the building had sat vacant for decades — some of it since the 1940s — and it was in various stages of disrepair, especially the upper floors that had

been damaged by water from a leaky roof. A sizeable portable swimming pool was even in place on the fourth floor to catch the leaks.

"That's an example of how forgotten the guts of this building were. To be able to participate in the refurbishment and creating new life for that landmark historic building was great for us," Gould said.

Jon Siebers, real estate attorney at SHRR, said Design Plus and the developers at Locus helped the firm's management see the potential the space held.

"They had a passion — they could tell what this could be," Siebers said. "We

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could create our own space here and it would make economic sense."

The new location will actually be smaller than SHRR's current office, but that's not because the firm is contracting in any way. Instead, they're moving away from a more traditional law firm office — complete with two libraries and onsite document storage — to take advantage of technology and the work styles of many of the newer attorneys. "We were very inefficient," Siebers said. Many attorneys don't need a large office anymore, but rather just private "touch down" space a couple of days per week as they move from office to office.

"This is a group of attorneys and they all want private offices. We had to try to work those offices to fit in the framework

of the existing openings," DeBruin said. "The challenge was — and this is not unique to Smith Haughey — between the old guard and the new guard. The old guard can be comfortable where they're at and not interested in change, while the new kids coming in want to work in a hip, urban and chic environment. We had to try to blend in the conservative nature of the older folks, yet the space had to be conducive to hiring new talent."

The design of the space is intended to show off the features of the historic building — the exposed brick and wood — while blending in a "fresh and modern" style fit for a high-tech office. To do that, Gould said he used a great deal of glass throughout the interior of the space to allow occupants to "look through" the space and still be able to distinguish the original structure.

"We wanted to get the architecture out of the way and let the quality

of the existing building come through. Wherever we could highlight the existing walls and murals, we left them exposed," Gould said. "We tried to have a light touch on this. We're putting a big law firm in a compact space, and we wanted to use glass and distribute that space."

The 100 or so wood-and-glass exterior windows are a key part of the renovation project, said Matt Zimmerman, project manager for **Wolverine Building Group**. But because they were in poor condition, the developer decided to replace them with historically appropriate replacements that recreated the same profile as the windows they replaced.

Another challenge was that the facility was once three separate buildings and crews had to work to connect the floors so that everything would be on the same level, he said.

The rounded prow that faces the street

intersection became a focal point on each of the floors, with it housing either a conference room or gathering spot. The curved wall and original windows will be incorporated to add a traditional element to the interior.

Locus is pursuing LEED certification for the core and shell of the property and is working with **Orion Construction** and **Cornerstone Architects**. SHRR tapped Wolverine and Design Plus for the interior portion of the project. The firm is going after LEED for interiors.

DeBruin said some projects can run into conflicts with simultaneous LEED and historic preservation efforts, but he noted the Flat Iron project was "somewhat painless."

"To overlay a historic preservation project on a LEED-certified building is unique because those two things can fight each other," he said. **MiBiz**