

# 'There is such a special energy in this building'

## Law firm moves into the renovated Flat Iron Building

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He knew quickly that it would make a great place to work.

You just had to look past the building's age, the dirty bricks, the dust, the dim lighting and the fact that the upper floors had been vacant for more than six decades.

"The people who were in it immediately saw its potential," said Bill Scarbrough, chief operating officer of Grand Rapids law firm **Smith Haughey Rice & Roegge** that now calls the historic Flat Iron Building home.

Smith Haughey Rice & Roegge's 54 attorneys and about an equal number of administrative staff moved into the renovated Flat Iron Building just before Thanksgiving following a \$4.5 million renovation.

"There is such a special energy in this building," Smith Haughey Rice & Roegge shareholder Craig Noland said during a ceremonial ribbon cutting last week. "It's given us a lot of energy and a lot of enthusiasm."

The Flat Iron is the second oldest building in Grand Rapids, dating back to 1860.

Owner **Locus Development** unveiled plans in 2009 to overhaul the building. Smith Haughey signed on as lead tenant in 2010, leasing 27,000 square feet and leading to a major renovation.

**Wolverine Building Group** did the construction work and **Design +** handled the design. The renovations included replacing the subfloor, restoring some of the original windows, installing a new HVAC system and cleaning the interior brick walls — including maintaining all of the "quirks" in the bricks, Scarbrough said.

"It was in pretty bad shape," he said. "It was just raw space. You had to have imagination, for sure."

Now the building sports a bright, contemporary interior and exposed architecture, new mechanical systems and a rooftop patio.

"I absolutely love it," Scarbrough said as he led a tour of the new quarters. "For me, I just feel it's a more interesting, fun place to work."

The law firm began looking for a new home as its lease in the nearby Calder Plaza building was set to expire. The Flat Iron's character, combined with its location in the heart of downtown, made it the right place for the law firm, which had scouted spots throughout the area, Scarbrough said.

A "very, very attractive" financial package from Locus Development also steered the firm into an 11-year lease at the Flat Iron.

"It just became a really attractive option for us," Scarbrough said. "This building is so different. It has the old and the new, and is right in the middle of downtown."

"It just has so much character."

In undertaking the renovation, the biggest challenge was to provide a modern, Class A space for Smith Haughey while maintaining the architectural and historical features of the building, said Andy Winkel, a partner with John Green at Locus Development.

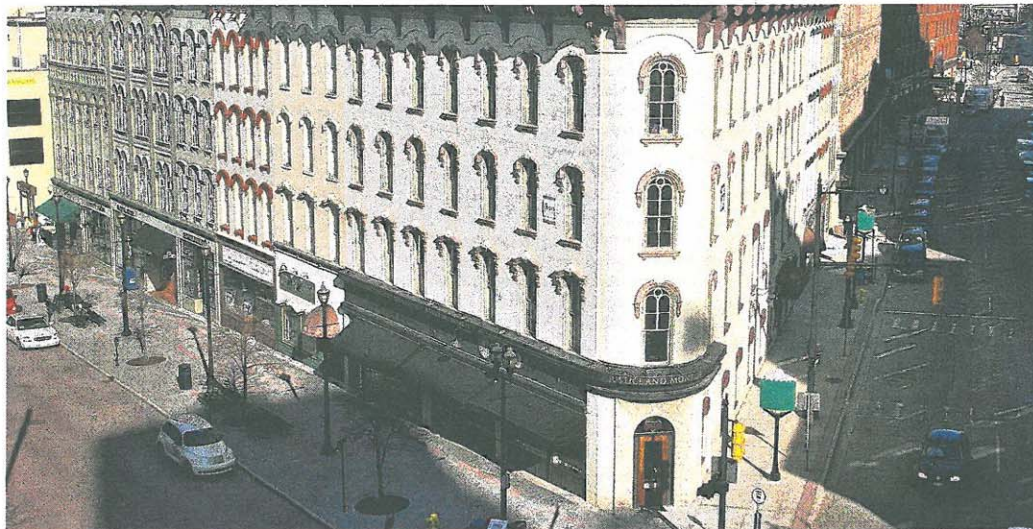
"We knew that we wanted to maintain the historically correct exterior appearance of three separate buildings, since the buildings were in fact constructed as three separate buildings. At the same time, the needs of Smith Haughey called for a much larger contiguous footprint on each of the buildings three upper floors. We were forced to get creative in making sure we could accomplish both," Winkel said.

"With the help of the right team of architects and contractors, we feel like we did a great job of accomplishing this, he said."

"We're very proud of how the project turned out."

Rhonda Baker, historic preservation specialist for the city, lauded the project for maintaining historic elements while bringing a modern feel to the space.

"I think this is a very sensitive



SMITH HAUGHEY RICE & ROEGGE MOVED INTO THE FLAT IRON BUILDING JUST BEFORE THANKSGIVING. FILE PHOTO

blend of the new and old," she said. "It was an empty canvas upstairs. To see life in it is wonderful."

A ground floor retail space that formerly housed Blake's Turkey has been leased to Old World Olive Press, a store specializing in olive oils and balsamic vinegars. Expected to open within the next few weeks, it will be the fourth location for the company, founded in

Rockford.

Occupancy of the Flat Iron Building, including the more than 100 people from Smith Haughey now working there, can generate some momentum for activity along Monroe Center, Winkel said.

"With that many new faces to the Monroe Center-Ottawa (Avenue) corner, activity is bound to pick up at the nearby restaurants, gift shops, banks,

etc." he said. "Outside of the pure number of new bodies on the street, the fact that the exterior of the building has received a great-looking facelift helps to create a more welcoming environment along the adjacent sidewalks. The more people want to shop and dine along Monroe Center, the better."

*Grand Rapids Press business editor Chris Knape contributed to this story.*