

## FROM THE PITS TO THE ARTS - ABANDONED SHOE COMPANY COMPLEX BEING REHABBED INTO A MASTERPIECE

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Four years ago, the old International Shoe Co. complex on Washington Avenue stood boarded and mostly empty. It was another of those big, historic buildings that deteriorate because of neglect and water damage, with not much hope for the future.

"It was the pits inside when we first saw it," recalled Thomas Klein, who runs a catering business there today.

"It was so bad," said Timothy Tucker, "that it took us two weeks just to get the front door open. It was that covered with filth."

Not anymore. Not since the husband-and-wife team of Robert and Gail Cassilly, both sculptors, and Tucker took on this cavernous 10-story, two-building complex at 1501-1509 Washington.

After spending about \$4 million in private money, and augmenting that with their own muscle and artistic creativity, they're bringing the place back to life.

"Like a phoenix rising from the ashes," Tucker said.

"But still evolving," Gail Cassilly said.

What's evolved so far is now called the International Arts Complex. It's a kind of eclectic mix of nearly 40 office tenants, small businesses, artist studios, and the City Museum, a three-level Cassilly creation opening in October.

If you include the museum, Tucker said, the complex is about 75 percent filled, with 500 people working there daily.

Most are in the brick back building, constructed in 1930 as a shoe factory and linked by a glass bridge to the more ornate, stone building facing Washington. The front building, designed by architect Theodore Link, opened in 1910 and for many years was the old shoe company's headquarters.

Late last year, HealthLine Management, a hospital and physicians consultant group owned by St. Louis University, moved from South Grand Boulevard into the front building. With nearly 80 employees, it is one of the larger tenants, occupying the original, wood-paneled corporate office suite and other areas on the seventh and eighth floors.

To help furnish the space, Robert Cassilly contributed a conference table he made with salvaged granite and marble, and an ornate light fixture that once hung in a bank. Gail Cassilly crafted a colorful tile wall mural.

"We were looking for space where we would have plenty of room to grow," said Frank Siano, company president. "I challenge you to find space like this anywhere else."

Another large tenant - the largest in the complex - is Biltwell Clothing Co., a reminder of the days when Washington Avenue was the city's thriving garment district.

Biltwell's 270 employees still sew together men's suit coats and sports coats in the back building. And that's not changing.

"We make 5,000 coats a week, 1,000 a day," said plant manager John Patsue. "We sell to companies like the May Co., and J.C. Penney."

Mostly, though, tenants there are what Tucker calls "young, start-up businesses, creative, and looking for inexpensive space."

People like D.L. Bullock, who started Piano World there shortly after Tucker and Cassilly got the front door open.

"I restore old instruments they say can't be restored," Bullock said. He then sends them back, by truck, to owners across the country. He also sells pianos and some organs, "everything from grandma's \$99 upright to one piano that costs a million dollars," he said.

Or Rich Wood, who with a partner started Silver Wing studio to make architectural models. "We've sent them to Portugal and China and everywhere in between," he said.

Most of the artists are on the fourth floor of the back building. Glass blower Robin Murez works there and gives classes. George Hellmuth and Kate Dunn make pottery. Photographers are at work.

All have 12-foot-tall studios with lots of natural light, created when Tucker and Cassilly partitioned a 61,000-square-foot floor with nothing more than fluted columns.

First, they built a 300-foot-long, 20-foot-wide hallway, now decorated with tenant Tim Curtis's whimsical sculptures. Then they tailor-made studios off the hallway.

"They use the hallway now for receptions and other gatherings," Tucker said.

Another unusual space is where Klein operates his catering business. He started with Windows on Washington on the ground floor in the front building, created after they tore out old shoe displays and walls and restored rows of Corinthian columns and a partly marble floor.

A year later, Klein said, "business was so good we needed more room."

So he expanded to the 10th floor, where architect Link had put massive columns around the outside of the building, only partly visible through windows.

"But we wanted the columns inside," Klein said.

The solution: They tore out exterior walls along the south and part of the east side of the building, replacing them with glass and glass doors. They also built a veranda so people attending events there can go outside for sweeping views of the city.

Four years ago, the Cassillys bought the complex for \$525,000 from Washington University, and started from scratch.

"At first," Tucker said, "we were pretty much giving away space at \$1.25 a square foot, just to get somebody in."

Today, space goes for \$2.50 to \$10 a square foot, depending on location. And they are making a profit, partly because of doing their own contracting, property management, and some of the restoration work.

"That way," said Gail Cassilly, "it all gets done quickly, and inexpensively."

They began by cleaning up not only the outside of their complex, but its surroundings.

"We were fighting the perception of crime and grime," Tucker said. "Statistically, we could show there was no crime. But it sure was dirty around here."

They weeded for a two-block radius, planted trees and planter boxes. Then they tackled a bothersome, bright green building across the street. Robert Cassilly made a frieze with baboons to decorate the front and, with the owners' permission, they painted the building a more soothing dark brown.

Robert Cassilly also made an eye-catching, 500-foot-long serpent with wrought-iron spikes on its back to enclose parking for the complex.

"Nobody in their right mind would have spent that much money on a fence," Gail Cassilly said, "but we wanted people to know something was going on in here."

Inside, they tore up old linoleum and orange carpeting, finding marble and terrazzo they've restored. They also updated mechanical systems and restored other architectural features in the building.

Tucker still recalls four years ago when Robert Cassilly first talked excitedly about a building he wanted to buy and renovate on Washington Avenue.

"I said, 'If you do this, buy the smallest building you can find because everyone I know who did it has gone broke,'" Tucker said. "So I credit our success today to the fact that Bob did exactly the opposite."

• Caption: Photos by Larry Williams Of the Post-Dispatch Staff -(1) Color Photo - RIGHT: Gail Cassilly at work in her office space, which contains a life-sized model of a manatee.(2) Color Photo - LEFT: Timothy Tucker, building manager of the International Arts Complex on Washington Avenue.(3) Color Photo - ABOVE: An entrance to the back building of the International Arts Complex.(4) Color Photo - RIGHT: Robin Murez, a glass blower, in her studio with her dog, Bongo.(5) Color Photo - ABOVE: Detail on the first level of the 10-story building includes the name of the old shoe company.(6) Photo - Elena Gazanchyan, left, paints a plate at Hellmuth Dunn & Co. pottery in the back building.

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