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A local effort

Hoke developers make good on commitment to hire area contractors

By Rachel Hixson

“Hutch rebuilds Hutch” is how Mark Davenport describes the complete renovation of the historic Hoke Building - the iconic downtown Hutchinson property that first went up in 1910 as office space and sat vacant and waiting for decades.

When Mark and his wife Phoebe - a Kansas City-based couple who develop large residential and commercial properties - first began the journey of restoring the dilapidated building at 1st and Walnut in early 2021, they committed to using local contractors as much as feasibly possible.

The couple has followed through. Every step of the way - from architectural changes to plumbing, electrical, plaster, painting, concrete and more - the Davenports have relied on local subcontractors to help convert the building into their vision of a 23-room boutique hotel featuring a wine bar and coffee shop. They’re planning to open the 4-story hotel in phases and are working toward having the first and second floors ready for traffic later this year.

But “Hutch rebuilds Hutch” doesn't just refer to the Hoke project. The Davenport’s foray into reviving neglected downtown Hutchinson properties started in the summer of 2020 with their purchase of the Plaza Towers and then the Leon Apartments - both in close proximity to the Hoke. Mark said “Hutch rebuilds Hutch” has been their mantra from the beginning.

“It’s the philosophy of our business,” he said. “Rather than go to large contractors out of Wichita, we’re working with people from Hutchinson or the local area looking to upskill.”

Mark and Phoebe - who acquired a general contractor’s license so they could manage the project and subcontractors - said there are many upsides to hiring local. Area subcontractors are more invested in the project’s success and willing to share ideas and collaborate.

“We got our license, and we became the general contractors and subbed everything out to licensed professionals,” he said. “It’s small businesses basically, which is super gratifying. They do great work.”

“It’s also kind of fun,” he added, “because often this is the first project like this that they’ve done, and so at times we’re figuring out the best solutions together. We’re in the same boat - it’s the first time we’ve done a project like the Hoke, too. Renovating the Hoke Building is very different from doing a single family house, so we appreciate their boldness in playing a part in this project.”

While work is winding down at the Plaza and continues at the Leon, the first external signs of progress at the Hoke emerged in September.

Ybarra Painting covered the 4-story, 16,000-square-foot building in a deep gray after M.L. Nevius finished the tuck pointing. Sturgeon Glass & Mirror provided commercial windows, and custom upper floor windows were installed by C&C Home Improvement in December.

“It was a huge thrill,” Mark said. “That was the first part of the project where something was finished.”

While not as apparent, a profusion of work has continued on the interior.

Yoder Builders installed a new concrete floor on the ground level, which had been taken back to dirt grade to return the floor to its original height, meeting ADA standards. Malloy Plumbing and Plumbing Solutions and Service have managed plumbing, and Service Plus Electrical Solutions has handled electrical work - with both requiring removal of portions of the street and back alley to make way for underground installations.

Rock Renovation is responsible for interior framing, while M&M's Construction is doing plaster repair and wall prep.

Interior Designer Em Galliard, owner of Lark Design Group, assisted the Davenports in initial space planning and will help establish a beautiful and functional interior that respects the Hoke's history and character.

"I think she was a lot of the brains behind squeezing everything in - in terms of bathrooms and making sure everything is the right size - because it's a puzzle," Mark said. "She's brilliant." Phoebe said architects with Mann & Company, working with Engineering Consultants, built the backbone.

"They were really creative in thinking outside the box of how we could meet code without taking away a lot of the history," she said. "It was a challenging process to work through that with them, but I feel like they were really flexible and creative and that helped us to get to a point where we had a feasible project."

Local photographer Kristen Garlow Piper has documented the transformation every step of the way, and local entities have provided fuel. Mark said Michelle Inskeep with Peoples Bank and Trust, Aubrey Patterson and Dell Swearer with Hutch Community Foundation and Jackson Swearer at StartUp Hutch have been their local funding partners. The three organizations joined with NetWork Kansas to initially invest nearly \$1.2 million into the project in the form of a construction loan.

Along with hiring locally, the Davenports are committed to celebrating the Hoke's historical character.

The top portion of many of the building's 60 or so windows were boarded, Phoebe said, so they removed the coverings to reveal the original brick openings. Drop ceilings were also removed, increasing the ground floor's wall height to about 20 feet and exposing the original ceilings - covered in ornate tin tiles.

Cracked and bubbled varnish on the original woodwork only adds character, Phoebe said. They don't plan to change it. Original fixtures - such as the toilet paper holders in the building's single set of bathrooms - will be reincorporated. Even items that can't be reused - such as the cast iron radiators finished with elaborate and exquisite detail - will be repurposed.

The Hoke is listed on both the state and national historical registers, which can restrict certain modifications to a property and be a source of frustration to many developers, but the Davenports don't mind. They're working with a historic consultant to ensure the renovations meet requirements.

"I think a lot of people sometimes butt heads with the historic folks because they are pretty particular about how they want to see you do it," Phoebe said. "But we really wanted to preserve the history. So there's been a few glitches along the way, but for the most part, what they want us to do is already what we would want to do for the project."

The Davenports are required to keep all existing walls within reason, except when modifications are necessary for guest safety. The building's original elevator was condemned and removed in the 60s, but the shaft remains and will need to be altered to accommodate an ADA-compliant lift. A second staircase will also be installed in the hotel's south end to meet regulations.

Historic regulations are the least of the Davenport's frustrations. Covid- and inflation-related issues have hindered progress. Necessary materials are harder to obtain and cost much more. It took a year for the windows to arrive - partially related to Pella relocating its plant.

Initial funding has gone toward getting the Hoke to its current bare state. However, because of the building's historic listing, The Davenports have received historic tax credits to help cover a significant portion of the renovation costs. The credits can be used to secure a bridge loan, which the couple is currently pursuing. They're also continually seeking local investors.

"I'm always interested in developing relationships with investors," Mark said, "and there's different ways that could work. If people are interested in what we're doing, and they want the return on their investment, we have places where we can put the capital that's fruitful for everyone."

Despite any frustrations and setbacks, the Davenports say they have cherished restoring the Hoke and can't wait to reveal the end result.

"It's been a long road," Phoebe said, "but it's been a very fun project. We love historic buildings and the whole process of seeing them come back to life."

The Davenports operate as LeVare Properties. For more information on the Hoke and their other properties, visit [levareproperties.com](https://www.levareproperties.com), which also includes links to social media profiles.