

Published Tuesday February 10, 2009

Historic site has room to spare

BY CHRISTINE LAUE
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

After 10 years of searching, Laura Shiffermiller found the building that she and her husband could renovate for the new home.



Windows on all four sides and the multi-hued brick were two of the features that attracted Shiffermiller to the building. Her daughter drew the mural on the windows.

On downtown's brick 15th Street, tucked between Jones and Leavenworth Streets, the two-story brick building would allow her to combine a passion for historical restoration and environmentally friendly construction.

"We just thought it was a perfect place," she said.

It was, however, a little bigger than they needed.

So the two developed a plan to utilize the rest of the building. Shiffermiller, development director for the Fontenelle Nature Association, and husband Bill Shiffermiller, a physician in the Methodist Health System, quickly found themselves playing the role of developer.

They plan to renovate the vacant building at 714 S. 15th St. into commercial space on the first floor and two, second-story condominiums, one of which they will call home.

Built for the Swartz Printing Co. in 1910, the building still bears the company name in a limestone plaque above the top-story windows. Below that is the name of its most recent tenant, the Driscoll Leather Co., which vacated the building before the Shiffermillers bought it in 2005.

Since then, the couple acquired a listing on the National Register of Historic Places and as an Omaha Landmark. They recently applied for and received city approval of the redevelopment plan.

The Shiffermillers are finalizing financing for the \$2.5 million project — a combination of loans from financial institutions as well as tax-increment financing, or TIF. TIF is a tax incentive allowing developers to use property tax generated by a project to help pay part of the costs.

They hope to start in May and finish in spring 2010, Laura Shiffermiller said. But the economy could determine the timeline.

While financial institutions have not turned them away, lenders are being more cautious about certain steps — such as the appraisal — before committing to fund the project, she said.

The Shiffermillers also are being cautious — they would like to sell the other condo before starting construction.

"We've got a project that is all up and ready to go, and we just want to make sure we have all the money in place before we start," she said.

The Shiffermillers, with Bahr Vermeer Haecker Architects, plan to renovate the building using sustainable building methods in accordance with the LEED System (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design). That means using everything from reclaimed brick to high-efficiency furnaces and solar panels.

Crews will undertake the meticulous restoration of the exterior storefront and interior brick walls, while installing new mechanical, electrical, plumbing and heating and cooling systems.

The renovation will transform the back of the first floor into a parking garage and storage space and will build loft space on the second floor, adding 1,000 square feet to its existing 10,000.

The condo's 14-foot-high ceilings will extend another 10 to 12 feet in some areas, creating loft space that essentially is a second story to the private residences. With the loft space, the condos will be 3,500 and 2,200 square



Laura Shiffermiller upstairs in the old Driscoll Leather Co. building in downtown Omaha, where she and her husband plan to put in two condominiums and first-floor commercial space.



Shiffermiller

feet.

Shiffermiller said she envisions a professional office or maybe even a boutique hotel in the commercial space, which also could be subdivided into two spaces. But she doesn't see a retailer in the space because the building might not have the foot traffic to sustain such a business.

That off-the-beaten-path characteristic played an important role in her decision to buy the building. She originally had envisioned a home in the Old Market but later decided that the building's neighbors — ranging from her architects to the Kimball Lofts — and the one-way street with access only from Leavenworth provided more of the quiet residential feel she desired.

Windows on all four sides of the free-standing building also attracted her, as well as the multi-hued brick.

"I love the outside," she said. "I love that it's not a fancy building, but it's a handsome old building with nice concrete and brick details."

Shiffermiller said she is proud to have the building listed on the National Register of Historic Places. According to documents used to acquire the designation, the Swartz Printing Company building is "an excellent representative example of an early 20th century commercial/industrial building in downtown Omaha."

"It was a chance to take an old building and give it new life," she said. "It's a great thing for the city to keep those properties intact and to find a new use."

• **Contact the writer:** 444-1183, christine.laue@owh.com



She and her husband plan to renovate the building at 15th and Leavenworth Streets into two upstairs condos and first-floor commercial space. They have owned the building for three years and have already gotten it listed on the National Register of Historical Places and as an Omaha Landmark.

Contact the Omaha World-Herald [newsroom](#)

Copyright ©2009 Omaha World-Herald®. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, displayed or redistributed for any purpose without permission from the Omaha World-Herald.