

Brownfields Success Story

Revitalization on the Docket Lexington, Kentucky

Built in 1898, the historic Fayette County Courthouse was in service by the courts for more than 100 years before operations moved to a larger building. After the courts moved out, the three-floor building was briefly home to the Lexington History Museum. When maintenance workers discovered structural defects, water damage and high levels of lead paint, asbestos and other hazardous materials, the city shuttered the building until officials could determine a new purpose.

A few years later, city officials unveiled plans to restore the building for a number of uses, including a restaurant and bar, office space, visitors center and event hall.

Holly Wiedemann, a private developer who helped lead the renovations, noted how important the project was for the city. “This magnificent, historic building is the centerpiece of Lexington,” she says. “It doesn’t give you a good impression of the community if its focal point is a vacant and abandoned building. We needed to bring the courthouse back to life.”

The Challenges

Forming a public-private partnership made the project eligible for more than \$11 million in state and federal historic tax credits, but it would have to meet strict requirements to qualify. For example, the building would need to contain both for-profit and nonprofit entities, and developers would need to have the building ready and open for business before the limited-time, expanded state tax credit expired.

Historic tax credits also required, before any work began, documenting the building’s existing condition and submitting the renovation plans for approval to the National Park Service and the Kentucky Heritage Council/ State Historic Preservation Office. Once approved, developers needed to confirm they had performed each step of the plan exactly as intended over the course of the project.

“Pulling this off required much planning and coordination,” Wiedemann explains. “If we did not place the building in service in time, we would forfeit millions of taxpayer dollars. Truly, failure was not an option.”



EPA Grant Recipient:

Lexington-Fayette County Urban Government

EPA Grant Types:

Brownfields Assessment, Cleanup, and Revolving Loan Fund Grants

Former Uses:

County Courthouse, Museum

Current Uses:

Restaurant, Bar, Visitors Center, Event Space, Office Space



Built in 1898 and shown here in 1907, the historic Fayette County Courthouse has long been the centerpiece of Lexington, Kentucky.



Restoration activities included building a new two-floor atrium and rehabilitating the rotunda and dome.



“This project became a lot bigger than just a building. It really touched on people’s hearts.”

*Holly Wiedemann,
President and Founder,
AU Associates, Inc.*

For more information:

Visit the EPA Brownfields website at www.epa.gov/brownfields or contact Bob Rosen at 404-562-8761 or Rosen.Bob@epa.gov.

The Cleanup

Environmental remediation, construction on the interior and exterior, and renovations took approximately three years to complete. The city conducted environmental assessment and cleanup using grant funds from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Brownfields Program and subgrant funds from the state’s EPA Brownfields Revolving Loan Fund.

For the project to qualify for tax credits, workers had to remove hazards like lead paint without damaging the historic fabric of the building. Workers had to carefully peel layers of asbestos tile, asbestos mastic, carpet and linoleum off of the original wood floors to preserve the craftsmanship.

Some hazardous waste came from pigeons that had infested the top floor of the building. During an expansion of the building in the 1960s, workers sealed the rotunda to create a fourth floor. Sealing the rotunda helped preserve it, but it also created a home for hundreds of pigeons. “No one had been up there for more than 40 years,” Wiedemann remarks. “We had both organic and non-organic hazardous material, to say the least.”

Remediation had to be complete before workers could begin restoration activities, which included:

- Building a new, two-floor atrium
- Rehabilitating the rotunda and dome
- Installing glass floors to allow visitors a view of the rotunda
- Installing indoor and outdoor lighting

The Benefits

The building is now completely in use. The Lexington Visitors Center is on the ground floor, along with a new restaurant and bourbon bar. The nonprofit VisitLEX, which occupies the second floor, runs the Visitors Center and organizes all of the city’s conventions. The third floor houses the Breeders’ Cup international headquarters, and the top floor—with its stunning architectural dome and rotunda, and thick glass floors—is an event space for up to 200 people.

The fully restored, in-use building is only one of the many benefits the project brought to the downtown area. Renovating the historic courthouse and enlivening the courthouse square sparked further development, including multimillion-dollar expansions of both a large sports arena and the Lexington Convention Center. A new hotel and numerous restaurants, small businesses and professional offices also began to pop up downtown, as well as a popular farmer’s market, which sets up shop in the square on weekends.

“There’s so much activity downtown these days, you can hardly find a place to park,” Wiedemann says. “It’s a wonderful problem to have.”

Wiedemann estimates the renovation project created approximately 500 jobs during construction and an additional 300 indirect jobs related to the service industry and for businesses in the building and nearby.

“What has been really wonderful is that it gave the City of Lexington a shining star to be proud of,” she says. “This project has received so much local, state and national attention. It really has filled everyone with quite a sense of pride.”