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# Crowning Glory

An abandoned pedestrian mall in St. Louis reopens as a bustling mixed-use corridor, jump-starting the revitalization of a down-and-out neighborhood. BY BARBARA BALLINGER

ST. LOUISANS ARE FIERCELY LOYAL—to Cardinals baseball, “concrete” ice cream treats, high schools, and even neighborhoods. Want proof? Devoted residents successfully rallied for the rebirth of the two-block 14th Street Pedestrian Mall in the heart of Old North St. Louis—a neighborhood located a mile north of downtown with an almost front-row view of the gleaming Arch—long after abandoned buildings convinced many that the area was better off left for dead.

Founded in 1841, Old North St. Louis experienced its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s when a mix of houses and stores dotted the 90-block district. The area began to flounder in the '60s and '70s when middle-class flight sent residents fleeing to the city's South Side and suburbs.

In 1974, two blocks were closed to traffic in hopes that a pedestrian-only mall would lure shoppers. Unfortunately, the plan failed. Less

traffic only served to further fuel the area's decline. Residents and retailers vacated more buildings; empty lots were strewn with garbage. By the early 1980s, the area resembled a ghost town, says Sean Thomas, executive director of the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group, a community-based nonprofit development firm.

Yet, stalwarts remained. “They saw something special slipping away,” Thomas says. “They knew they had to work together to revive the area or their community would get worse.”

But restoring the outdoor mall—and the greater neighborhood—would be a long time coming. With the 2009 to 2010 conversion of the 14th Street Pedestrian Mall into Crown Square, a mix of mostly two- and three-story buildings converted to mixed-use space, the area is finally showing signs of life after more than four decades of revival efforts.

**BACK IN BUSINESS:** Two community development groups spearheaded the conversion of the 14th Street Pedestrian Mall into Crown Square, now a bustling mixed-use corridor. The neighborhood, located a mile north of downtown St. Louis, is alive with action after nearly four decades of revival efforts.

Top: John Gray, Rosemann & Associates;  
Bottom: St. Louis Old North Restoration Group



### NEW BEGINNINGS

In 2003, the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group and the Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance (RHCD), a nonprofit partnership with experience restoring neighborhoods, banded together to develop 100 new single-family homes in Old North St. Louis. Two years later, the groups discussed reopening the 14th Street Pedestrian Mall to bolster residential life and re-create the area's "heart," says RHCD president Stephen Acree. The groups renamed the mall Crown Square.

However, before the groups could bring their idea to fruition, another economic downturn intervened in 2008 and halted construc-



► **PROPERTY:** Crown Square ► **LOCATION:** St. Louis ► **DEVELOPERS:** Old North St. Louis Restoration Group and Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance  
 ► **ARCHITECT:** Rosemann & Associates ► **LENGTH OF RENOVATION:** Two-and-a-half years ► **SCOPE OF PROJECT:** Mixed-use corridor of 27 buildings with market-rate and affordable housing above 26 of the buildings

tion after only 20 homes were built. But the early momentum showed finance sources that the area was viable, and the planning continued to transform the mall, Thomas says. The St. Louis-based architecture and planning firm Rosemann & Associates was hired in 2005 for its adaptive reuse expertise to rehab what would become Crown Square.

"The buildings were in rough shape, but there were great candidates for rehab," says project manager Rob Wagstaff, an architect at Rosemann. "We also thought it was critical to reintroduce the street. With traffic flowing through, life and animation would return."

Alderman April Ford Griffin, whose 5th Ward encompasses the area, agrees. "Pedestrian malls are a thing of the past. You need parking in front so shoppers can run in and move on," she says.

### AT LONG LAST

Altogether, the two community organizations purchased 27 historic buildings for a total of \$2 million in 2007, with storefronts planned for first floors and 80 market-rate and affordable apartments above 26 of the buildings. The goal was to put back what had been there 80 years ago, visible in old photos, including

John Gray, Rosemann & Associates

	THEN	NOW
USE	Pedestrian mall	Mixed-use corridor
VIBE	Vacant and depressed	Bustling and optimistic
VALUE	\$2 million for purchase of 27 buildings	\$35 million invested to date



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from JCPenney and Missouri Historical Society archives, Wagstaff says. New materials were incorporated when necessary, such as double-pane glazing, carefully matched to original profiles and permitted by historic tax credit dollars, a key funding source.

Because of the condition of the old buildings, the construction of Crown Square took longer than expected—two-and-a-half years. Sixty of the 80 apartments have been leased. A one-bedroom, 800-square-foot affordable unit (available to residents earning 50 percent to 60 percent of AMI) averages \$430 monthly; a one-bedroom market-

rate apartment goes for roughly \$620, according to Thomas. To date, one-third of the commercial space is leased; tenants include a women's clothing boutique and a real estate development office.

Positive results ripple beyond Crown Square. Community gardens flourish with flowers and produce grown for a farmer's market and grocery co-op; the neighborhood's main park has new playground equipment; and nearby commercial and residential buildings are alive with color, the work of murals by area youth.

Many familiar with the area say that it's

beginning to look even better than it did in its heyday. "So many years of disinvestment means it takes time to change the landscape. But we're creating a diverse community, in income and services, so people living here don't have to drive to [St. Louis] County," alderwoman Griffin says.

The timing is propitious. With increased national interest in urban living, the neighborhood is destined for success. **[M]**

**BARBARA BALLINGER** is a freelance writer living in St. Louis.

## SLOW BUT STEADY

Collaboration and focus helped bring Crown Square to sweet success after years of rehab efforts.

**1. Maintain a strong vision.** The Crown Square development team stayed true to its original goal of retaining the area as

a small, historic neighborhood with rich architectural stock. Developers reconfigured old brick buildings into housing; revamped a neighborhood

park; planted gardens; and opened new neighborhood shops.

**2. Collaborate with residents.** Old North St. Louis Restoration Group and the Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance listened to the needs and wants of neighborhood residents as the two groups worked together to refurbish Old North St. Louis. "Residents have been passionate and persistent about wanting to see this happen,

including some from other city neighborhoods," says Sean Thomas, executive director of the Old North St. Louis Restoration Group.

**3. Follow a winning formula.** Nationwide, healthy urban living continues to gain proponents who want close proximity to downtown; pedestrian-scaled mixed-use buildings; and walkability from homes to shops, parks, and community gardens.



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