

HEART OF THE CITY — GILLHAM ROW



"House Dreaming" by Steve Whitacre at Gillham Row

John Hoffman, one of the principals at Urban Coeur Development, came by his love of historic buildings one sandwich at a time:

"I grew up in Kansas City, in Brookside. I used to take the streetcar downtown, where I worked in my father's drug store at 12th and Grand. So I practically lived downtown. From age 10, I used to make deliveries all over downtown—lunches, prescriptions. I knew every building downtown. And back in those days, back in the 50s, there were shops and movie theaters. It was wonderful, lots of energy."

As part of that trolley ride, he passed by the auto dealerships along Gillham Road. In the 1920s, Gillham Road was the city's main thoroughfare for the automotive trade, with car dealerships, repair shops, and gas stations. But by the 1960s, most of the shops were closed and the buildings vacant.

As a long-time member and former president of the Historic Kansas City Foundation, he had the opportunity to look at a lot of buildings. He'd also developed a deep antipathy toward destruction of good buildings. "I don't like to tear down good buildings. If there is any way to reuse them, I will." And he felt that Gillham area had the potential to return to its glory days.

His first efforts were not immediately successful. In the early 1980s, he and the Historic Kansas City foundation attempted

to begin the rebirth process with five houses at 28th and Holmes. He recalls that they were in an advanced state of disrepair, but he convinced the foundation that "if we did those five houses, it would be the catalyst that would drive the rebirth of the neighborhood. We used our in-house architect. But it was too early for the neighborhood."

However, by the 1990s, developers began to realize the potential of the neighborhood as a pocket among downtown, Union Hill, and Crown Center and Union Station. Hoffman was one of those developers. With the stirrings in the neighborhood, he began the process of developing the Gillham Row, Battery Lofts, and Triangle Townhomes condominiums.

He began by securing urban redevelopment and historic preservation financing. The City declared the area around the buildings an urban redevelopment district (URD). The purpose of the URD is to encourage and accommodate redevelopment of

"That's the first rule of good urban planning—working with the neighborhood. Who wants to be the outsider? Coming in saying 'you should have done this' and 'I'm the expert' and 'here's what we're going to do.' That doesn't get you very far."

“What we’re trying to do is rebuild neighborhoods. The last thing we want to do is build one building, then move on.”

blighted sections of the City. He also received historic preservation tax credits for his redevelopment of the Triangle Battery building. With these tax credits, Hoffman feels he is better able to compete on a level playing field with other developers who have access to state and federal incentives.

The Gillham Road development is proceeding in three phases. Phase I, which included Gillham Row, Battery Lofts, and Triangle Townhomes, was completed in 2004. It is completely sold, and recent resales have been for about 15% more than the initial purchase. The second phase will expand onto Cherry Street, and the third phase will move north on Gillham Road.

Hoffman's one regret is that he did not expand his initial vision for Gillham Row. When construction began, land speculation drove prices up to unmanageable levels. “If I had to do it again, I would try to control more land. I would try to work with other

The Battery Lofts



By the Numbers

Gillham Row, Battery Lofts, Triangle Townhomes

- ◆ 2900-3000 Gillham Road and 2931 McGee Trafficway
- ◆ Development Dates: 2002 to present
- ◆ Cost to Develop: \$50 Million
- ◆ Developer: UHP3, LLC

land owners who didn’t want to sell, but still wanted to stay here.”

By controlling more land, Hoffman could also control the pace, style, and quality of construction surrounding his developments. More than a building developer, Hoffman sees his role as a neighborhood developer. He was adamant in his desire to include a neighborhood coffee shop as a focal point for the development. He also attempts to include a range of price points, to encourage first-time as well as established buyers, and tries to price units so they are consistent with prices in the rest of the neighborhood. He also declined to include rental units, saying “I don’t want renters. I want people who will buy, put roots down. That’s the most important factor in the rebirth of a neighborhood—having people with ownership.”

Using smart growth principles, Gillham Row and Battery Lofts were able to serve a new housing market:

- ⇒ By using compact building design, Gillham Row and Battery Lofts maximized the number of units without sacrificing quality or aesthetics.
- ⇒ By creating housing opportunities in an area that was sitting largely unused, Gillham Row and Battery Lofts created a new housing market and anchored its own expansion.
- ⇒ By fostering distinctive attractive communities through its reuse of historic buildings, Gillham Row and Battery Lofts took advantage of historic tax credits and created a distinct brand.
- ⇒ By encouraging collaboration, Gillham Row and Battery Lofts forged relationships with neighborhood land owners, large and small.

FUELING UP — SERVICE STATION CONVERSIONS



The Filling Station at 29th and Gillham Tfwy

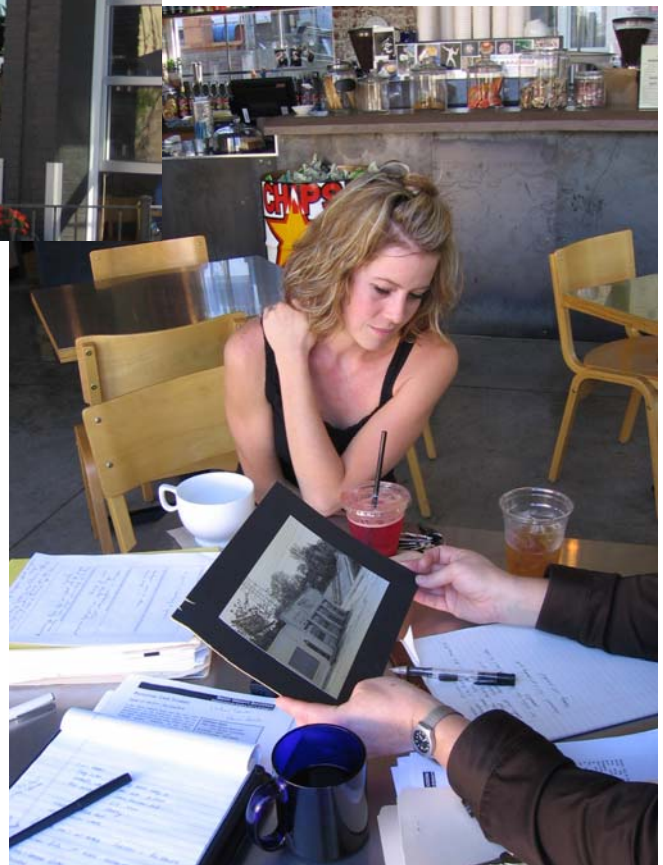
Old or abandoned gas stations are persistent barriers to neighborhood redevelopment. Because of the issues related to leaking underground storage tanks, developers often are reluctant to shoulder the possible environmental liabilities. However, the widespread distribution of these abandoned sites, their small size, and their existing neighborhood presence offer opportunities for smaller retail developers or budding restaurateurs.

In 2003, John Hoffman of Urban Coeur development saw the potential for a neighborhood asset in an abandoned Standard Oil station adjacent to his Battery Lofts development. Realizing that a neighborhood coffee shop would become an asset for his development, he approached the proprietors of the Coffee Girls coffee shop, located in the Crossroads District. He offered them the opportunity to create a new enterprise at 29th and Gillham.

At first, Robin Krause was reluctant to start a new venture. “[He] came to me and tried to talk me into it for 3 months, and I kept saying ‘no,’ ‘no’ because

there was nothing in the neighborhood.” Persistence paid off, however, and Krause agreed to take the leap. “They kept showing me diagrams, and making the offer better. They just kept promising me that this was going to happen, and it did.”

Between the offer and the opening on December 1, 2004, however, the building had to undergo a major transformation. Constructed in the



Robin Krause and the original Standard Oil station

mid 1920s, the building operated as a Standard Oil station for 47 years. In 1975, the original owner retired, and the building was used as a glass shop and a detail shop before sitting empty. According to Krause, the building was “horrible” when she

“I’ve worked in several coffee shops over the last 11 years, and you either have one type of customer or the other. Occasionally, somebody will walk in who looks completely out of place. But here, there’s no one who looks out of place. You’ve got students, lawyers, Art Institute types - and a priest who comes in everyday. Just everything. I absolutely love it.”

“I’ve had residents tell me that the only reason they are leasing here is because they have a coffee shop right outside their windows. A man in the Battery Lofts actually walks out his window to get here rather than walking around the building.”

first moved in. The underground gasoline tanks had already been removed when the renovation began, but additional confirmation sampling was required.

On top of the effort of construction, Krause was sometimes frustrated as she learned to navigate the permitting and inspection process. She had originally planned to include a drive-up window but discovered that the configuration of the streets around the building precluded it. She was also frustrated by a steep learning curve as she negotiated the building process. “It was hard getting answers out of people. We would ask a question, and get an answer like ‘I guess so.’ I was only 25, and I would think ‘help! I don’t know who else to turn to.’ . . . But you would see shelves of plans in [the city staff] offices, and you would realize that they had *so much* work to do.”

Ultimately, however, reusing the old Standard station has paid off for Krause by building her customer base and her brand. The open garage doors provide natural light and an expansive dining room. They also act as an advertisement that the Filling Station is open for business and an invitation to passers-by. “If people see the garage doors open, they stop,” said Krause. She also feels that the historic building attracts consumers, saying “People’s attitude is completely different than if I were in a strip mall.”

In addition to providing caffeine, the Filling Station, along with its adjacent Triangle Park, provides a focal point. Customers walk and bike from surrounding neighborhoods and businesses. The greenspace is used by nearby residents.



Filling Station interior

Ultimately, Krause feels that she learned enough through the process that she might be ready to go again. “I know a lot more now than I did then. So I can say ‘this is how it’s going to be.’” And she would like to see more of her friends take the plunge. “A friend of mine is moving his store to downtown, and I just wanted to hug him. It was so exciting to see him take that step.”

Using smart growth principles, the Filling Station was able to grow as a business:

- By mixing land uses, the Filling Station used surrounding residential properties to establish a customer base, which, in turn, adds value to the residential real estate.
- By being part of a walkable community, the Filling Station increased its visibility to potential customers and its availability to downtown and Crown Center customers.
- By creating a distinctive place through its use of a historic building, the Filling Station distinguished its brand from those of other coffee shops and restaurants and preserved the history of the Gillham neighborhood.
- By preserving and enhancing green space, the Filling Station drew in residents from the surrounding community.
- By strengthening existing communities, the Filling Station integrated neighborhood residents with workers from surrounding businesses.