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# Institutional Architecture & Landscapes



# Upstairs Downtown

A downtown revitalization program in Illinois is breathing new life into upstairs spaces in historic buildings.

**T**housands of buildings in America's older downtowns have vacant upper floors. These spaces have a central location, high visibility and complete community infrastructure and are prime candidates for redevelopment. The state of Illinois has tackled this problem (opportunity) head-on with its "Upstairs Downtown" program. This award-winning initiative helps owners reclaim and reuse these vacant upper floors and turn them into income-producing properties.

The Upstairs Downtown training program was developed by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency (IHPA) and the community of Rock Island, IL, for the Illinois Main Street program. It is designed for building owners, contractors, architects, city officials, preservationists and downtown professionals.

The IHPA Main Street program was adept at designing improvements to the building facades that give such a great identity to the older downtown but they recognized that something more was needed. In the words of Mike Jackson, IHPA's Chief Architect, "Improving the facades was only part of the goal, and we needed to do something to actively help owners figure out how to use the empty spaces behind these great facades. We started looking around our state and noted the success coming from Rock Island, IL, which set in motion a partnership that is still working today."

The Rock Island program (Dan Carmody, director) involved a number of different organizations. Renaissance Rock Island, a multi-faceted organization promoting and developing downtown Rock Island, provided expertise in developing difficult projects and doing the creative financing. The City of Rock Island had developed a unique financial support tool that was specifically aimed at assisting small properties to put housing back downtown, and the IHPA provided the skills in historic preservation in both design and the use of public financial tools, such as the historic rehabilitation tax credits. All of these came together in the Upstairs Downtown program.

The program quickly came to realize that this was not just about buildings, but about building the community's capacity to understand real estate development and preservation. Putting these upper-story spaces back into use in the community created a crash course in real estate development for a highly defined typical building. Like the Main Street program, Upstairs Downtown emerged as an economic development program based on historic preservation with a total awareness of the bottom line. Owners needed to know about real estate development and finance, cities needed to know about rehabilitation building codes, and communities needed to know if they possessed all the required skills.

Though it started as an annual event in Illinois, the Upstairs Downtown program found an audience nationwide. A half-day presentation at the National Town Meeting on Main Street in 2005 resulted in calls from other states. In 2006 the program won an Honor Award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This innovative workshop has now been sponsored by more than ten states around the country. John Simone, President and CEO of the Connecticut Main Street Center, said, "The Upstairs Downtown program put together the resources to help 'mom and pop' building owners. This was a great new tool for the toolbox of downtown development."

The Upstairs Downtown program approach to training is one that the IHPA is sharing through a special website, [www.upstairsdowntown.org](http://www.upstairsdowntown.org). Presentations by many different specialists are provided as research documents. Case studies of projects in Illinois are also included. Downtown tours of completed and undeveloped spaces are one of the noteworthy aspects of this coordinated approach to redevelopment. These tours have become annual events for many downtown organizations and they help build public awareness of their community assets.

## Case Studies

Several communities throughout Illinois have model Upstairs Downtown projects, with mixed-use occupancy adding vibrancy and character to the downtown districts.

The McKesson Lofts in Rock Island, IL, are a prime example. Take a long-standing brick building with lots of character and charm. Add a healthy dose of contemporary styling and you've got a great place to live in downtown Rock



A \$6.6 million project, the McKesson Lofts in Rock Island, IL, will offer 17,000-sq. ft. of commercial space on the first floor, plus condos on the second and third floors. It will also have a green roof, underground parking and 25 other green characteristics. Photo: Rock Island Renaissance



The spacious McKesson Lofts feature contemporary styling; the average size is 1,200 sq.ft. and the average price is \$175,000. Photo: Rock Island Renaissance

Island, an economically and socially diverse community in northwestern Illinois. The lofts are located in the center of a vibrant neighborhood near artists' galleries and studios, restaurants, a brew pub, coffee shops, nightclubs, a comedy club, a botanical center, a dinner theatre, unique shops and a hotel. Located at 100 19th Street, the McKesson Lofts, a \$6.6 million project, will offer 17,000-sq. ft. of commercial space on the first floor, 10 condos on the second floor and 12 on the third. Amenities include a green roof, underground parking and 25 green characteristics. With an average area of 1,200 sq. ft., the condos cost between \$129,900 and \$249,000 for the penthouse, with an average price of \$175,000.

This project is currently still in development, although some tenants have already moved into their new homes. It represents just one endeavor of the Rock Island Economic Growth Corporation (GROWTH), which works under the multi-faceted Renaissance Rock Island program. GROWTH is locally responsible for housing, neighborhood and community marketing programs. Many of its housing programs have become national models. Locally, GROWTH has served as a catalyst to help spur the commitment and investment of many public and private partners.



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American Bankers Building at 110 North East St. in Jacksonville, IL, became a white elephant when the large insurance company that occupied 32,000 sq. ft. on the first and second floors moved out. The second floor has been rehabbed into a banquet facility and now serves more than 70,000 guests a year. Photo: Dave Blanchette, IHPA

As a Community Housing Development Organization (CHDO), GROWTH has worked to leverage more than \$83 million in local investment in its mixed-income/mixed-use and single-family-homebuyer programs in Rock Island. GROWTH has earned a healthy reputation as a trendsetter in creating and implementing cutting-edge housing programs.

The impact of these activities on Rock Island has been phenomenal. To date, GROWTH has developed 150 units of loft housing in downtown Rock Island. When the private sector was unwilling or unable to develop upper story housing, GROWTH stepped in to locate funding, which created fabulous new living spaces and new neighborhoods. GROWTH is regarded as a local and national leader in developing innovative and attainable housing opportunities, as it convenes and facilitates work among various community partners. Its staff has more than 125 years of combined experience in employer-assisted home-buyer programs, home-buyer purchase and renovation programs, home-buyer counseling, infill construction, adaptive-reuse projects (including downtown loft housing) and multi-family developments.

#### Jacksonville's White Elephant

Another example is the American Bankers Building at 110 North East St. in Jacksonville, IL. It was known locally as a "white elephant" after the large insurance company that occupied 32,000 sq. ft. on the first and second floors moved out. In 2002, local caterer George Hamilton embarked on a dramatic rehabilitation to transform the building's second story into a signature banquet facility. Within eight months, 110 North East was fully operational, with all new systems, updated restrooms and a refurbished elevator to provide accessibility.

Historic features, such as the fireplace and chandeliers, were retained to preserve the elegant style of the historic building. A four-level vault was adapted for liquor storage, while a storage room was transformed into a comfortable smoking lounge complete with murals depicting historic downtown street scenes. Now the area's premiere reception and meeting site, 110 North East serves more than 70,000 guests annually in three banquet rooms with capacities of 90, 150 and 430 people.

The ground floor is a mixture of office, service and retail businesses. From the outside, this early-20th-century architectural treasure has barely changed; however, transforming the second floor into an elegant banquet hall has attracted tremendous positive attention on revitalizing downtown Jacksonville, while retaining and enhancing the district's historic character.



The second floor of the American Bankers Building in Jacksonville is now three separate banquet facilities, serving 90, 150 and 430 people. Photo: Dave Blanchette, IHPA

#### Lincoln Lofts

Nearly threatened with condemnation, Lincoln Lofts was quite a challenging complex of two of the oldest commercial structures within the city of Alton and perhaps within the state of Illinois. Built individually in 1835, the buildings were combined shortly after completion to form the Franklin House, a 42-room hotel. The hotel was later renamed after Abraham Lincoln after his family dined in its restaurant during one of his celebrated debates with Stephen A. Douglas.

Like so many early hotels, the Lincoln fell on hard times in the 20th century; it closed after declining into a flop house for transients. While the ground floors remained rentable, the upper floors sat vacant for decades. A partial rehabilitation in the 1980s demolished several of the historic hotel rooms, added apartments to the second floor and left the third and fourth floors a vacant shell.

In 2006, the current owners, Julie and Jason Harper, began rehabilitating the building, completing extensive structural repairs and ridding the building of its former tenants — hundreds of pigeons. The Harpers worked closely with staff at the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency to meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, a requirement for obtaining the Federal Historic Tax Credit. While maintaining historic stairs, corridors, trim and pressed-metal wainscoting, the Lincoln Lofts project converted the long abandoned upper floors into 11 market-rate apartments.

For more information on the Upstairs Downtown program, contact Anna Margaret Barris at [annamargaret.barris@illinois.gov](mailto:annamargaret.barris@illinois.gov) or call 217-782-7534. She and other IHPA staff can answer most questions concerning downtown redevelopment issues, including universal accessibility, improving buildings while keeping their history and character intact, bringing buildings up to code, improving energy efficiency, obtaining insurance and applying for tax-related incentives.

This article was prepared by Mike Jackson, chief architect, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency (IHPA), Anna Margaret Barris, IHPA project designer, and Dave Blanchette, IHPA public information officer.



New owners Julie and Jason Harper restored the upper floors of an 1835 derelict building in Alton, IL, creating the Lincoln Lofts, with guidance from the Upstairs Downtown program. Photo: Anthony Rubano, IHPA



The long-abandoned spaces in the Lincoln Lofts are now 11 apartments. Photo: Anthony Rubano, IHPA