

MAKING HISTORY

BY FRANK MAUCK



Cohen-Esrey Affordable Partners' Clay Hall, Enid, Okla.



HISTORIC TAX CREDITS HELP RESTORE A NEGLECTED COMMUNITY TO ITS FORMER GLORY.

Situated atop a hill just beyond the Enid campus of Northern Oklahoma College, Clay Hall, once a women's dormitory for Phillips University, sat vacant, a silent sentry awaiting its chance to once again be a place called home.

At the same time in Overland Park, Kan., Cohen-Esrey Affordable Partners was on the hunt for its next project. Its evaluation of considerations such as population density, tax credit availability and status on the National Register of Historic Places led it to the long-neglected Clay Hall.

"The project had very favorable metrics," says Ryan Huffman, CPM, Managing Director and Senior Vice President of Cohen-Esrey Communities. "Historic redevelopment is challenging, but ultimately rewarding. These are buildings that mean something to people, but you've got to be up to the challenge, especially when taking into account the element of regulation."

Life's Too Short

Ground broke in 1941 for Clay Hall, named after Robert Henry Clay, who gifted \$25,000 for the construction of the dormitory at Phillips University. The exterior was complete by 1942, but construction was interrupted by WWII. The interior was completed in 1946 at a total cost of \$175,000. The north and south wings were added in 1951 and 1959, respectively, to accommodate an influx of new students. With the additions, Clay Hall housed 258 women in a 59,000 square-foot space.

Financial turmoil and declining enrollment forced Clay Hall, Phillips' oldest dormitory, to close in 1987. There it sat for nearly 30 years, until Cohen-Esrey, a group of dedicated alumnae and historic tax credits combined to give it a new lease on life.

Like a Phoenix

It goes without saying that rehabilitating a community is a challenge; even more so when that property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"The state preservation office controls a lot of the

design elements," Huffman says. "We need to keep the historic fabric and maintain the overall feel when it was in its prime."

This becomes orders of magnitude more difficult when the building has been out of commission for more than 20 years. Keeping Clay Hall looking and feeling historically accurate involved working through the requirements set out by federal, state and local agencies.

"We take into account what's functional when we approach a project," Huffman says. "One particularly challenging aspect of this project was in the construction of the wings, which lacked direct pass-throughs to all floors of the main building. It took a lot of convincing to get this approved—typically they say, 'No, that's not the way it's constructed'—but we were able to show that the movement between structures was to everyone's benefit."

This change led to what Huffman calls the "coolest units." Their unique "U-shape" results from being designed on the angle of the building—an adjustment to allow for the new pass-throughs—they're the most sought-after apartments in the community, which is dedicated to housing low- to moderate-income residents older than 62.

Sometimes, though, adjustments can't be made, despite the fact that they don't create the most appealing look. To wit: The north and south wings referenced above, because they had been later additions, had a different floor stain, which was required to be retained. But, in the end, dear reader, if you'll allow a new spin on conventional wisdom: "It is what it was."

Keeping the community true to its history provided another benefit: In late April, the National Park Service selected the Clay Hall Project to be recognized as a Featured Case Study for its use of the federal historic tax credit.

Times Are Changing

On the interior, dorm rooms were combined to create one- and two-bedroom apartments. The six common



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rooms were maintained as activity rooms for the residents, such as a craft room, game room and library.

"We made the outdoor areas more robust and the interior turned out beautiful," Huffman says. "All 30 apartments were fully leased up and occupied within three days of completion."

Rents in the one and two-bedroom apartments are \$385 and \$460, 50 percent of the median income for the 62 and older residents. The total development costs tallied \$6.8 million, with \$4.9 million for construction and \$1.9 million in soft costs such as architect fees, much of which was offset by federal and state historic tax credits.

In the end, "historic credits really do preserve buildings," Huffman says.

History Repeats Itself

At the beginning of the project, Huffman says he and his team were unaware of "The Women of Clay Hall," an alumnae society that gets together bi-annually to relive their university experience.

Writes 1982 graduate Carla Gibbs Kelman in the Spring 2012 "The Phillips Connection," "Besides the people you met at Phillips, Clay Hall was the best part.... I get all warm and fuzzy

when I think of Clay Hall. I made the friends of a lifetime in that building."

Gibbs Kelman's sentiments, and many others like it, illustrate the fond memories the women had for their former residence. They had a direct impact on the Clay Hall rehab, too.

"The society had old photos of the lobby," Huffman says. "We took the pictures to furniture stores and had them recreate all the furnishings exactly as they were when these women called Clay Hall home. We then had the pictures blown up and now they serve as artwork in the lobby. The society and college were overjoyed with the outcome—they even want to bring people on tours now."

There is more to repurposing historic structures than just preserving crumbling façades and removing blight caught under the footsteps of history trudging forward, though.

"The best part of this project: Having the women in to tell us their stories and see the look on their faces when they see what we've done," Huffman says. "It's a powerful delivery tool, restoring the magnificence of the original." ■

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