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Rehabilitating Iconic Main Street Buildings as a Catalyst for Community Revitalization: The Ohringer Building



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This past summer, the rehabilitation of the Ohringer Building in the small Pennsylvania town of Braddock was finished, culminating from decades of work by local advocates, politicians and developers to restore what the project's developer Gregg Kander referred to as "Braddock's Empire State Building."

Long before the advent of malls and internet shopping, commercial activity across the United States was centralized on downtown's Main Street. In smaller communities, locally based department stores, corner drug stores and office buildings dominated not only commercial enterprises but also the built environment up until the post-World War II era. Since that time, however, small towns have experienced prolonged periods of disinvestment as suburbanization and deindustrialization resulted in the loss of local commerce.

Developers and politicians alike have long sought to reinvest in and reinvigorate downtowns in an effort to restore the areas to their former glory. One of the most impactful ways of sparking economic revitalization is through the use of the historic tax credit (HTC) program. With HTCs, developers have the ability to offset the increased cost of rehabilitation, saving buildings that played integral roles in the community's past, while showing that these buildings can play an equally important role in building for the future.

In smaller communities, however, utilization of HTCs can be more challenging due to the traditionally

lower rents and higher transaction costs. One means to offset the challenges of rehabilitating historic buildings in small communities is to twin the HTC with the low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC) as a means to make projects financially viable. Twinning HTCs and LIHTCs has become one of the most commonly used tools in the HTC toolbox.

The rehabilitation of the historic Ohringer Home Furniture Company Store, referred to locally as the Ohringer Building, serves as an excellent example of how twinning HTCs with LIHTCs can successfully restore an important local landmark to its former glory. Additionally, the project effectively illustrates how historic preservation is serving as a catalyst for further investment into the small Pennsylvania town outside Pittsburgh.

The Ohringer Home Furniture Company Store

The Ohringer Home Furniture Company was founded in 1904 in Braddock. In the early-20th century, Braddock was dominated by the furniture industry. By the time the Ohringer Building was constructed in 1941, Braddock Avenue, the town's main commercial

thoroughfare, featured eight different furniture stores. By the 1940s, the company expanded throughout the Pittsburgh suburban area, building stores in towns such as McKeesport and Greensburg. Despite its growth, Ohringer remained an integral fixture in Braddock's economy until closing in 1964.

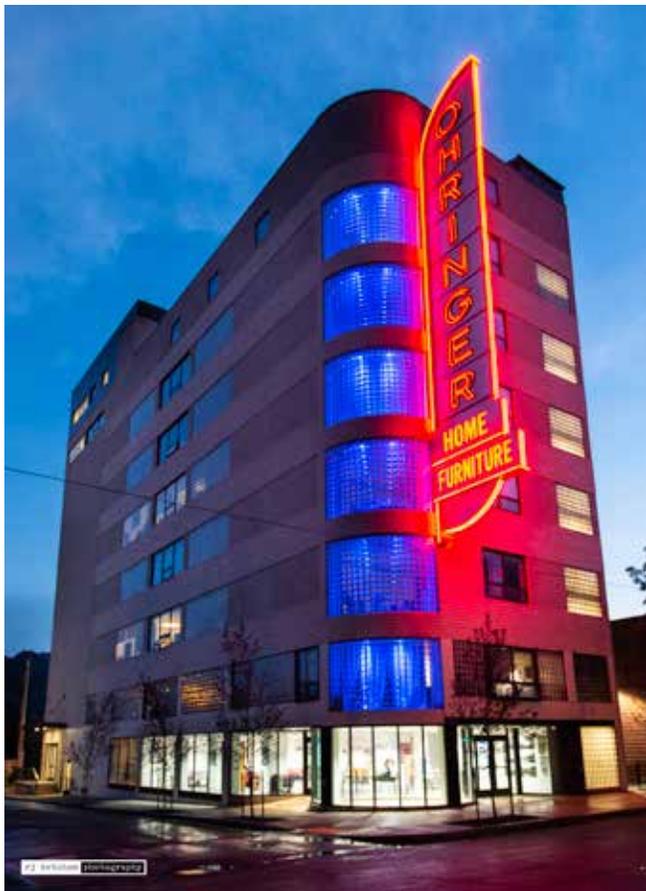


Image: Courtesy of Robert Ketcham, Ketcham Photography
Completion of the Ohringer Building's rehabilitation, the direct result of twinned historic tax credits and low-income housing tax credits, has sparked additional investment in the Braddock, Pennsylvania, community.

The Ohringer Building was designed by well-known Pittsburgh-based architect Harry H. Lefkowitz. Lefkowitz utilized a cutting-edge Moderne design that makes the building stand out as one of the most unique and prominent in the town. The Moderne style was common in American architecture between 1930 and 1950, but its more limited use in small town America makes the Ohringer Building visually iconic in the local community. The Ohringer Building features typical character-defining features of the style such as glass block windows and a prominent curved corner along its primary elevations. The

Ohringer Home Furniture Company Store was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2020.

The Rehabilitation of the Ohringer Building

Efforts to rehabilitate the Ohringer Building date back to 2009, when present-day Pennsylvania Lt. Gov. John Fetterman was mayor of Braddock. When looking back on the completed project, however, Fetterman noted, “while there are many, many people deserving of gratitude and credit, it’s Gregg Kander’s core vision, tenacity and heart that made this remarkable endeavor possible.”

Kander put his heart into this project and, as a result, his personal story is intertwined with that of the completed rehabilitation. Originally from New York City, Kander began his professional life as an attorney. Following a personal tragedy, Kander found his way to Braddock and invested in a restaurant that became an immediate success. Kander recounted that after the restaurant grew to rank as one of the top restaurants in the country that he “was told to keep going to show the entire [western Pennsylvania] region that Braddock is on its way back.”

Kander and his team, which included the architectural firm of Rothschild Doyno Collaborative and Sota Construction, set out to create artist housing. Throughout the process, Kander made sure, as he put it, “that the residents shared the vision with the development team,” and that “every design aspect needed to be planned out beforehand” to ensure the building’s repurposing was a success not just for the future tenants, but the larger community.

As a result, new walls and corridors were installed at the upper floors to create apartment units, a rooftop deck was constructed and provided unparalleled views of Braddock and the Monongahela River, and leasable tenant space at the first floor was updated to honor the commercial history of the building. The completed project, according to Kander was a “home run.” He noted that there is “not a unit in the building that does not have spectacular views,” though it was the rooftop

deck that “sealed the deal” and has brought joy to Braddock residents when they see the view from one of the city’s tallest buildings.

The project relied upon the combination of HTCs and LIHTCs to close gaps in financing. As Kander explained, “we could not have completed this project without either the HTC or LIHTC.” He continued to note that “these were two of the main sources of funding.” Despite the successful twinning of the two tax credits, Kander noted that “the blend of HTCs and LIHTCs got complicated at times,” and that “[he] needed to surround [himself] with a team that knew exactly what they were doing.”

With the building now open to residents, the completion of the property is sparking further investment in the Braddock community. According to Kander, there is a planned neighboring coffee shop, a hair salon recently opened near the Ohringer Building and multiple properties are currently working on façade restorations. Directly behind the Ohringer, a carpentry trade school is being constructed and is owned and will be run by one of the subcontractors

on the Ohringer project. Kander is working on three additional rehabilitation projects in the town and Carnegie Mellon University graduates opened up Fifth Season, a multimillion dollar vertical grow facility to sell produce to local supermarkets.

With all of this reinvestment into Braddock, Fetterman explained that “former residents have told me how much it means to them to see one magical piece of ‘my Braddock’ brought back to the ‘way it really was.’” He expanded that the current residents in the building also express how meaningful their residency within the building is to them.

Beyond Braddock, the Ohringer endeavor represents how developers can combine HTCs with LIHTCs to finance rehabilitation projects that serve as a catalyst for further development. With these tools, economic revitalization can have a profound impact on communities across the country, allowing developers a solution to allow for an otherwise infeasible project to be financial feasible. ❖

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Cindy Hamilton is president of Heritage Consulting Group.

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