

BUSINESS & Real Estate



DELICIA LOPEZ/STAFF

Alamo Architects recycled the pine floor planks from run-down warehouses at 1512 S. Flores into a stunning stairway and for the surrounding area. The architecture firm reused almost everything on the site when renovating it.

SoFlo, so reinvented



MONTE BACH/STAFF

Architectural firms join 'renaissance' of South Flores area, transform warehouses.

BY RACHEL STONE
EXPRESS-NEWS BUSINESS WRITER

The old warehouses at 1512 S. Flores seldom drew notice except for complaints that the deserted industrial complex was an eyesore. "They were these horrifying buildings," said Steve Thurlow, the real estate broker who listed them. "I can't tell you what I'd have to go through to describe it or explain to people where it was because nobody noticed them."

In a matter of months, however, they've become serene, cutting-edge office spaces for two San Antonio architecture firms. Alamo Architects and O'Neill Conrad Oppelt Architects Inc. transformed a bunch of rusty old metal buildings and their concrete-covered grounds into an environmentally friendly and inspiring place to work.

Some see the makeover as the biggest catalyst yet for transformation in the area known as Five Points or SoFlo, a neighborhood south of Southtown and King William that's been on the upswing for the past few years.

The architecture firms reused almost everything on the site, from old concrete slabs now used for fencing to old overhead doors now used to divide cubicles. Windows lining the spaces provide so much light that employees



RACHEL STONE/STAFF

hardly have to turn on the electric lights. And a cistern collects rainwater for irrigating the native plants in their gardens.

The space feels urban and natural all at once; but more importantly, it feels like San Antonio, said Mickey Conrad, principal of O'Neill Conrad Oppelt.

"People are rediscovering these old parts of

The ground floor of the former Wong Grocery Co. at 1502 S. Flores has been leased to The Yard, a retail outlet for vinyl records and more.

See FIVE POINTS/3C



DELICIA LOPEZ/STAFF

Wrought iron that formerly was used for warehouse windows has been turned into fencing at the back entrance to Alamo Architects' new building in SoFlo.

Five Points' lure is catching on

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San Antonio and seeing all the character they have," Conrad said. "We're trying to help this area through its renaissance. And hopefully, it's here to stay."

The offices are a selling point for Thurlow, who shows them off to potential buyers shopping for commercial space in the area.

"I cannot tell you how huge that is for this area," Thurlow said. "It brings in office deals and entrepreneurial companies, you know? It brings a whole strength to this neighborhood that was totally void here."

Kicking off the area's renewal four years ago were the Camp Street Lofts, developed by philanthropist and artist Linda Pace at South Flores and Camp Street, said Julie Hooper of King William Realty. That project opened around the same time as the city's Development Services Department building at South Flores and South Alamo, and was followed by the South End Lofts at 1331 S. Flores, which nearly sold out before they opened.

"It's a domino effect," Hooper said.

Hooper recently sold the building at 1501

S. Flores — believed to be one of the city's first filling stations. The buyer has plans to turn the building into two living suites.

Hooper wishes she'd bought more property in the area.

"I really believe in that area. I've done a lot of business over the years and watched the value climb exponentially," she said.

Parts of the neighborhood still seem blighted by vacant buildings held by investors who for years hoped the artsy developments of Southtown would flow into Five Points. Brent Widen, who owns the two-story Wong Grocery Co. building and who has bought and sold several buildings in the area, says it's time for those investors to develop, or to sell to someone who will.

Widen recently leased out the ground floor of the Wong building, at 1502 S. Flores, to Josh Pearl, a 30-year-old entrepreneur who's opening a vinyl record store called The Yard, which also will sell clothes, shoes, DJ equipment and art supplies.

Widen bought the building from Ben Wong, the son of the building's namesake, in 1995. Since then, it's served as a rooming house for artists, an office for Widen and a

gallery and party space for San Antonio's artistic scene.

Now that Widen is in his mid-40s and living in the suburbs, he's handing the place off to younger artists.

"The reason I gave (Pearl) the lease is because they were like fresh blood," Widen said.

Some other residential projects are about to get rolling.

In January, developer Phillip Allen, who created the South End Lofts, bought the Judson Candy Building at 831 S. Flores and expects to announce soon the details of his project, the Judson Candy Factory Lofts.

Austin developer Dennis McDaniel is planning a condo development, which hasn't been named, in the Whittigs building near the South End Lofts.

Now that the architecture firms have taken a leap into SoFlo, it doesn't seem so wistful to imagine more offices, retailers and restaurants, Thurlow said.

"These guys have invested millions, so they feel pretty good about this area," he said.

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