

# Fort Worth Business Press

## Historic buildings help to revitalize downtown office space

**BY JOHN-LAURENT TRONCHE**

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Construction in the city's central business district is at an all-time high, reaching nearly \$1 billion in planned projects, according to Downtown Fort Worth Inc. While high-profile developments such as the One and Two City Place buildings and Cantey & Hanger Plaza are well under way, the area's array of historic buildings are also luring companies.

After growing its business and doubling its employees in the past year, benefits consulting firm Johnston & Matthews needed more space, founder and partner Brent Matthews said.

At a friend's request, Matthews and his associates explored the ground floor of the Historic Electric Building – it was dark and dated, Matthews said. But beauty was in the details: a vaulted ceiling, detailed woodwork and a prime location at the corner of 7th and Lamar streets.

The firm hired Christy Foster of the Fort Worth branch of TUSA Office Solutions, and in just 90 days, renovated the lobby's interior, repainting and adding modern touches, but leaving the original architecture intact.

The firm's move from the Fort Worth Club building gives Johnston & Matthews room to grow, Matthews said, and a historic space to connect with the downtown culture.

"We love the energy of the city and being downtown," he said, "and we even feel that much more now that we're down on the first floor, as opposed to the sixth floor of the Fort Worth Club."

The Fort Worth-based company is just one of a handful of businesses that are contributing to the ongoing revitalization of the city's central business district.

XTO Energy Inc., which owns five buildings downtown, has been a major factor in the effort to restore older buildings to their earlier grandeur.

"They were all crown jewels at one time or another in downtown Fort Worth," said executive vice president Vaughn Vennerberg, "so bringing them back to their original splendor is such a great asset for the city and brings us joy as well."

The company renovated the W.T. Waggoner, Bob R. Simpson (formerly Baker) and Petroleum buildings and is currently working on the Transport Life Building, now known as 714 Main, and the Binyon-O'Keefe Storage Co. building.

The energy firm uses the buildings, each built before 1930, as its collective headquarters. Vennerberg credits CEO Bob Simpson for the company's interest in preservation.

"We're just thrilled to be in them and fortunate to have buildings that face each other," Vennerberg said. "It certainly makes a very pleasant working environment for our employees and contributes to the livelihood of downtown and Fort Worth."

The bottom line

Local architect John Roberts has studied downtown architecture for more than 20 years, and he understands the trend of revitalizing historic properties.

If the building is in good condition, Roberts said, it would usually cost less to renovate it rather than demolish and rebuild or build elsewhere.

Vennerberg acknowledges the unexpected kinks that come with structures that are, frequently, almost a century old.

"When you're dealing with buildings that are 40-, 60-, 80-years-old, there are always different issues," he said, "such as where support columns are and how you deal with them."

Companies and individual building owners, such Shirlee and Taylor Gandy, who own the Ashton Hotel and Ashton Depot buildings and the Winfree building, and Traci and George Cravens, who own the Park Central Hotel and Flatiron buildings, have helped to fuel a renewed interest in Cowtown's downtown, which is good for business and good for the city, Roberts said.

"It shows the city is still continuing to grow," he said, "because that's all part of the natural evolution of cities – demolition, new construction, adaptive re-use, preservation, everything."

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