

Historic restoration of a modernistic building

Two firms' new home brings attention, tranquility and cool things to sit on.

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The historic restoration of a small, 1950s office building in the Cherry Hill neighborhood is drawing attention from more than just local observers. People in Lansing and in Washington, D.C., are keenly aware of the project too.

And the world's leading office furniture maker is remaining close to the endeavor, as well, while waiting for a final report.

The building being closely watched by so many is a two-story, 5,800-square-foot structure at 645 Cherry St. SE, the only office address in a residential neighborhood. Lott3Metz Architecture and The Highland Group bought the building earlier this year and are renovating it for their respective home offices.

Lott3Metz, an award-winning design firm owned by Ted Lott and Greg Metz, will set up shop in about 1,600 square feet on the ground floor. The Highland Group, a marketing and design company that won six silver ADDYs and a Telly Award this year and is led by Scott Crowley, will take the remaining first-floor space and all of the second level.

Metz said his architectural firm is leaving its Heartside address at 3 Oakes St. SW because the company is growing and needs more space. He also said he and Lott want to own their building; they have been leasing from Paul



SCOTT CROWLEY, Greg Metz and Ted Lott are teaming up to renovate the 1950s building at 645 Cherry St. SE. Photography by Jim Gebben

McGraw and Eric English for the better part of the past decade.

"They're our friends. We get a good-friends deal," said Metz with a laugh.

The building-sharing idea came about because Metz and Crowley are friends and decided if they found the right building with the right amount of space in the right location, they would consider purchasing it together. After looking at a few buildings, they found the right fit on Cherry Street.

"All of a sudden this thing came up. We said this thing is perfect for the two of our companies, but too much for one of our companies," said Metz. "They're a lot like us. They're cutting edge and forward thinking."

Even though the building is about a half century old, Metz said the structure is in great shape. They've gutted the interior, replaced the roof and installed double-paned windows.

"The nice thing is, we didn't

have to put any money into the expensive stuff," said Metz.

All totaled, the firms have put about \$1 million into buying the building and into the restoration work.

The project received historic tax credits, and that is one of two reasons it is being eyeballed so much. The building is one of a select few in the country to be classified as a modernistic office structure and be awarded those credits.

"There are a lot of eyes on it in Washington, where the National Park Service is located. It's kind of a thing for them to set precedents on. And the state of Michigan is excited about it because it's one of their firsts, period. It's the same deal; it helps them determine what's important and what's not important in a modernistic, historic building," said Metz.

"So it's kind of fun because there are a lot of eyes in the preservation world on this project. There is a lot of excitement, as a result, because we're showing them that you can restore these modern buildings. And I'll tell you, without those tax credits I don't think this project was possible."

On top of that, Lott3Metz has an agreement with Turnstone, a subsidiary of Steelcase Inc., to try out some of the firm's prototype office furniture in its new location.

In return, Turnstone gets to bring potential clients to the office to see the furniture in action.

"So it's kind of a win-win for both of us. We get product at a significantly reduced cost: free. And they have a cool, fun and hip place to show clients. They're going to do a study of us on their Web site. So it's kind of a fun partnership between our two entities. We'll provide feedback to them and help them develop their line," said Metz.

Standing under a national spotlight and getting the latest office furniture for free aren't the only advantages that come with moving to Cherry Street. Being the only office building in a residential neighborhood offers a separate benefit.

"It does have a nice feel to it. There are a lot of trees. It's just beautiful the way the light filters through. I think, ideally, we would have loved being downtown, but for the price ... The location is just dynamite. The Cherry-Diamond area is just booming right now. So we're excited about being on the fringe of that. And it's close to our houses," said Metz.

"The residential certainly gives us a different feel. It really calms it down. We like that, and we think our clients are going to like that, too."

At least a few of their clients are already familiar with that feel.

The firm designed the new Corez Wine Bar and the Cherry Deli, both of which are just a few blocks from their new home.

"We joke that we can now go visit our clients more often than we do now," said Metz.

The Highland Group will move from 1593 Galbraith Ave. SE, near Watermark Country Club.

Metz said his firm would be in its new space by the end of this month.

"We're going to lease a car for the company, and we're going to walk and ride our bikes to work. When you come to work, you've got a car there," said Metz. "Ironically, now we have a parking lot and so we're trying to do things to not use it."