

By Cory Fleming



Saving Part of One City's *History*

A strong public-private partnership makes
the difference for one Brownfields site.



Most communities have significant historic buildings that may or may not have environmental contamination, but are definitely part of the physical fabric of the community. As such, these buildings need to be saved to preserve the community's sense of place, and an adaptive reuse found in order to make the buildings' preservation economically feasible.



In the city of Alexandria, Louisiana, the Cotton Brothers Building serves as a gateway into the central business district. The structure, built in 1932, first housed a family bakery. With its bold lines, asymmetrical composition, and horizontal emphasis, the building is an excellent example of the Art Deco style popular in the late 1920s and 1930s.

When the bakery was relocated in 1957, the building was expanded and made the headquarters of the Continental Southern Bus Lines, a forerunner of Continental Trailways. The building fell into decline in the 1970s and 1980s as Alexandria began experiencing the effects of urban sprawl so prevalent during that era.

Early Beginnings

In January 2007, Alexandria's Mayor Jacques Roy authorized hiring a full-time staff person for the Alexandria Historic Preservation Commission (AHPC) so it could move forward in its historic preservation work for the city. One of the commission's earliest accomplishments was getting the Cotton Brothers Building and two other local buildings listed by the Louisiana Trust for Historic Preservation as three of the top 10 endangered buildings in the state. The Cotton Brothers Building serves as an anchor for Alexandria's historic Bolton Avenue corridor and is considered key to smart growth plans that will encourage infill development in the city's core.

In March 2007, AHPC's quick response delayed action by a local demolition contractor who had purchased the building and, after failing to sell the property, had scheduled it for demolition. The group worked feverishly to locate a purchaser and develop a restoration plan for the property. The commission was also instrumental in securing a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation to design a streetscape plan for the nearby Bolton Avenue business corridor for which the city provided matching grant funds.

During this same time frame, the Central Louisiana Chapter of the American Red Cross was looking for a new home. The organization's original facility in Alexandria had only 3,000 square feet, not nearly enough to handle the supplies needed for warehouse and distribution functions during a disaster. The space was also landlocked with no room to expand, and it had limited parking.

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, the organization developed a strong relationship with Magna International, Inc., based in Canada, which established a model community, Magnaville, Louisiana, for families and individuals displaced by the storms. While Magnaville was being prepared, the corporation provided shelter for displaced residents in Florida. When Hurricane Wilma impacted that facility later in 2005, Magna turned to

the Red Cross of Central Louisiana to shelter the evacuated families until the completion of Magnaville.

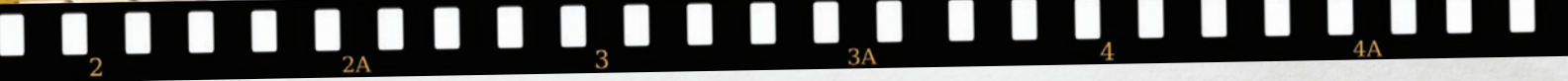
Subsequently, because of the support of Magna founder Frank Stronach and the generosity of the Canadian Red Cross, the Central Louisiana Chapter of Red Cross received almost \$1 million earmarked to support building a new headquarters.

The nonprofit wanted to keep its headquarters in Alexandria, which is located just inside the safe zone and, thus, is outside the area where hurricanes and other storms are most likely to hit in the region. It is considered an ideal location for serving and housing storm victims.

Considering the Building

Members of the Red Cross board of directors and CEO Leann Murphy approached Alexandria's mayor to request the city's assistance in finding a facility there. The city recommended the Cotton Brothers Building as one possibility. Initially, the Red Cross eliminated the building from its list of potential new sites because of possible environmental problems stemming from the building's original construction as well as its subsequent use as home to Continental Trailways.

A local corporation, Petron LLC, together with AHPC convinced the Red Cross to reconsider the building. Steve Ayers assured the nonprofit that Petron was willing to renovate the building for the Red Cross at cost-plus-zero.



The results of the phase 1 assessment did indicate that a phase 2 assessment was needed, but the efforts to clean up the site following the closure of the bus terminal had been advanced, and the presumption was that environmental contamination was unlikely to be extensive. The contaminants of concern included asbestos, lead-containing paint, PCB, mold, and groundwater contamination along with an underground storage tank (UST) no longer in use. A phase 2 environmental site assessment was performed in 2008 as part of the Targeted Brownfields Assessment (TBA) Program.

Through this program, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provides free assessment services to support communities' brownfields cleanup and reuse projects. The state of Louisiana, through the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ), required additional sampling to evaluate enclosed space for vapor intrusion issues

related to a potential reuse plan for this site. EPA went extra steps and funded additional sampling.

In July 2008, a TBA phase 2 report was prepared to relieve the prospective purchaser of concerns about site contamination. EPA went the extra step again in 2008 by providing a phase 1 update to assist a new owner in satisfying liability protection criteria for a bona fide prospective purchaser.

EPA also obtained concurrence from the state historical preservation officer to ensure that planned TBA work would not adversely affect any cultural or historic resource; this is a requirement of the National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106, which involves a review of any federal undertaking. EPA spent more than \$91,000 on TBA assessment work, saving the Red Cross expenses that it would not have been able to justify to its board of directors and its donors for the building project.

Critical to Success

LDEQ's voluntary remediation program was critical to the project's success because the program acted as technical adviser and decision maker. The LDEQ's assurances and explanations of site contamination issues to the prospective purchaser, the Red Cross of Central Louisiana, at critical moments in the land transaction deal made the difference in the purchaser being willing to acquire this contaminated site.

Another critical factor in convincing the Red Cross to move forward with renovation plans was the state of Louisiana's historic preservation tax credits. With the help of the AHPC's Melinda Anderson and Allied Design Group's Bill Tudor, parts 1 and 2 of the Red Cross's application for Louisiana historic tax credits have been approved.

Once the project is completed according to the plans as approved, the Red Cross will receive tax credits that can be sold, giving the nonprofit additional funds to support ongoing expenses. The Red Cross can sell the 25 percent tax credit for as much as 80 to 90 cents on the dollar, meaning more than \$240,000 will come back to the nonprofit.

The groundbreaking redevelopment project started in January 2009 and is scheduled for completion by December 2009. The Red Cross is spending \$1.4 million on building and site renovations. Thanks to the cooperation of the city of Alexandria and the AHPC, the Louisiana Trust for Historical Preservation, the state of Louisiana, the Canadian Red Cross, the American Red Cross, and the EPA and its brownfields grants, a magnificent structure has been preserved for an important community use.



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The city sees the redevelopment of the Cotton Brothers Building as a first and important step forward for its new SPARC (Special Planned Activity Redevelopment Corridors) program. The city has bonded \$40 million and will match that amount with \$16 million from its own capital outlays to reinvest in the city's historic and economic corridors.

Bolton Avenue is seen as one of the most important for the city because of its proximity to downtown Alexandria. As renovations to the Cotton Brothers Building get under way, the city will develop a revitalization plan for the adjacent corridor.

The plan will likely involve a number of corridor enhancements, including relocation of public utilities, new lighting, and sidewalks. Nearly \$400,000 in assessment grant funding secured through the EPA for the city's brownfields program will also be an important tool. The combination of all these resources along with the public-private partnership that formed around the Cotton Brothers Building will result in the future revitalization of the city's central business district and inner core.

Key Practices

Stakeholders involved in the project identified three key practices that led to the success of this project:

1. Talk to all of the stakeholders at every step of the process. Since early in the project, the Red Cross has had discussions with all the different stakeholders, explaining what its needs were, learning what resources were available, and understanding what

constraints might or might not exist surrounding the potential project. In particular, the nonprofit took time to meet with neighborhood groups and community foundations to explain its ideas regarding the project; this helped build community support and raised more than \$400,000 in additional funds necessary for the property acquisition and renovation.

2. Ask for help. The overwhelming community support—from both the private and the public sectors—for this project was instrumental in fast-tracking it through the various federal and state processes required for the building's renovation.

3. Communicate often and keep the information flow going back and forth. Leaders in the effort identified e-mail as being critical for ensuring that all the steps in a complicated process were taken. Clear and constant communication was necessary in order to adhere to the environmental assessment and historic preservation processes necessary for this project.

Although the renovation of Alexandria's Cotton Brothers Building is a unique project, the fundamental organizing principles the community implemented in bringing the project to fruition can be applied by most communities to brownfields projects in their own backyards. **FM**



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