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ARTICLE

BILL LAVICKA - RESTORATIONS

When Bill Lavicka wants something done well, he does it himself. A structural engineer, preservationist, and Navy officer on active duty during the Vietnam war, Lavicka owns Historic Boulevard Services. He rehabilitates older, income-producing properties in the Tri-Taylor Historic District on Chicago's Near West Side. Through his work he restores the homes, the churches, and the hearts of the people of Chicago.

Lavicka and his wife, Alys, formed their construction company as a sideline business in 1975 with no money and no financial backing. Now the company grosses over one million yearly with ten permanent employees.

"What we see today is a complete resurgence of the central cities from the inside out," explains Lavicka. "People who appreciate the commerce and culture of a city don't want to commute two to three hours a day. You can buy some of these old buildings for the same price as a cheap carpet - one or two dollars a square foot. After rehabilitation, you have a luxury dwelling."

Historic preservation evolved over the last twenty years as a grassroots business. Urban pioneers who restored their own homes developed the skills through on-the-job research and training. No schools taught the required courses. You had to contend with architects and developers who always wanted to tear down and build new. You had to fight with bankers who would not write mortgages on old houses. Now lenders know that urban restoration means money in the bank.

Spurred by the Historic Preservation Act that gives investment tax credit for the rehabilitation of historic

buildings, entrepreneurs throughout the United States have formed hundreds of small businesses to satisfy the demand for reconstruction. "You can start with one building that is undervalued and pyramid your way to a fortune," Lavicka says.

"Plenty of millionaires in Chicago have done just that."

Even though the investment tax credit offered by the Historic Preservation Act has been cut to 20 percent from 25 percent under tax reform, you can still make money in restorations, according to Lavicka.

The Act is a federal law but the states implement it. Illinois has its own inspectors who give invaluable advice. But you have to ask for the tax credit before the government can exert its policing authority. "A building designated for historic preservation is supposed to be in a historic district or be of historic interest itself. You try to keep the exterior true to the original concept. You don't want to sandblast it or change the outside window openings. If some element has been renovated badly in the past, you should restore it to pristine purity."

The Lavickas learned the business by restoring their own Chicago home, a Victorian mansion built in the 1880s by the Hines Lumber family. "It helped that I was a graduate engineer,"

Lavicka says. "I always loved antiques and I have a good feeling for old buildings. After we finished our home, we got our first commissions by word of mouth and business just took off from there."

"Old buildings have a wealth of ornamentation that you can't buy," Lavicka continues. "People are beginning to appreciate an old building for what it is, to repair what they can, and to replace the missing pieces in keeping with the original. We learned that you don't need to gut a building to do a good job but we usually replace the utilities, wiring, and plumbing. We add insulation to the ceilings and drywall over existing plaster. We redo the fireplaces so they work and save the staircases and other ornamental features."

The value of a building depends on many things. "It is not always what you have in it," Lavicka says. "Financially, it is best to buy and rehabilitate a building in a neighborhood that has been down and is now going up. Since the Historic Preservation Act requires that you hold a building for five years before reselling, you have the best chance for maximal appreciation under those conditions."

Lavicka never expects to run out of work. "There are plenty

of old buildings in Chicago. The problem is to get to them and fix them up before someone else tries to tear them down," Lavicka says.

To Lavicka, the logic of rehabilitating a Chicago home is unassailable. "The tragedy of our nation is that the median price of a house is now \$100,000," Lavicka says. "For that you get a little crate made out of 2x4's - a doll house in the suburbs."

"On the other hand, for \$20,000 to \$30,000 you can buy a decent house in Chicago with things that work, and maybe even a connecting flat that will help to pay your mortgage. And not in a bad neighborhood either."

What is a bad neighborhood in Chicago? "That is the big question. If they shoot you, it's a bad neighborhood. Most of the neighborhoods in Chicago outside of the central core area are good neighborhoods. Let's put it this way," explains Lavicka.

"Probably a third of them have never been considered bad, another third of them are now considered bad by the old European residents who resent the new arrivals just off the boat, and maybe a third of them are really kind of bad and you should stay out of them. I know a family who lived right next door to one of the housing projects for ten years and never had any kind of

trouble. Then they moved to River Forest and the first month someone bashed in their car and stole it."

Lavicka loves Chicago and its old homes. He also loves its old churches. "Beauty is what takes people out of the gutter," he says. "If you live in a place swarming with rats and cockroaches but you worship in one of the grand old churches, you can go into that place and be transformed into one of God's princes. You feel that you are somebody and you can do anything. People have to have beauty."

Although he is an Episcopalian, he is trying to save two old Catholic churches, St. Mary's of the Angels and Holy Family. "The Chicago Archdiocese wants to abandon them but their congregations want to restore them. We have drawn up proposals to show that the work can be done for much less than the Archdiocese estimates. These churches are works of art and their destruction would be a cultural crime."

He has already earned his credentials in the Chicago Archdiocese. "Our biggest project so far was the renovation of a monastery slated for demolition - Our Lady of Sorrows Basilica at Jackson and Kedzie streets. We put together a plan that gave them one hundred usable rooms. If they had torn it down and

built anew, they would have been lucky to end with up ten rooms."

Other builders tackle homes and churches, but Lavicka is the only Chicago builder to construct his own Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He did it himself with a little help from his friends. No committees, no formal fund raising, no political infighting.

The memorial rises from a 25-foot lot just south of five buildings that Lavicka renovated in the 800 block of South Oakley. An old Chicago lamp post illumines each corner. Two Buddhist dragons flank an entrance stone and symbolically protect the hallowed ground. Small marble stepping stones lead to the main structure at the back of the lot. Ten cast-iron columns painted blood-red soar to the sky from a concrete circle in which is embedded a black granite map of Vietnam. Vietnam Survivors Memorial, 1960-1975, America's Longest War.

Ever the scavenger, Lavicka rescued the columns from a gutted office building, the gargoyles from an abandoned Catholic church, and the lamp posts from an electric company. Friends and business associates donated money, materials, and labor.

The memorial cost \$50,000. (The national memorial in Washington, D.C., cost \$9 million; the state memorial in Springfield, Illinois, cost \$1 and 1/2 million). Lavicka has

established a non-profit foundation to own the lot and memorial and to maintain it in perpetuity.

Why did Lavicka undertake such a project? Lavicka served with a 700 man Seabee unit in northern Vietnam in 1967-1968. He came back; seven did not. Lavicka remembers every one.

"There's no doubt that I've always been a Don Quixote kind of guy," Lavicka muses. "Chicago's Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Parade in 1986 inspired me but I wanted to do something myself. I owned this empty lot and I said - why not? I didn't need to ask anyone's permission. I didn't even need a building permit."

Does the memorial mean anything to Chicago veterans? Lavicka thinks that it will become a rallying point for the more than 200,000 Vietnam veterans in the metropolitan area.

"Remember that this is a survivors memorial," Lavicka stresses. "God bless those who didn't come back, but the survivors had the hardest time of all. Even before I finished this project, a guy called me on the phone one night and cried for thirty minutes. Twenty years of agony - a peaceful guy - he just got thrown into something and he never got over it and he never will. We never received any honor from the country that sent us there so now we are honoring each other. You did a good

job and I did a good job and welcome home at last."

The columns are placed far enough apart so that a wheelchair can enter the central circle. Anonymous visitors leave notes and flowers. "This is a happy place," Lavicka thinks. "You can find peace and healing here."

More than 500 people attended the dedication ceremony on November 7, 1987. Chicago's mounted police carried the flags. Neighborhood stores and restaurants donated food and beverages.

The Chicago Humanities Council sponsored a book-reading last June by Larry Heinemann, a Vietnam veteran and author of *Paco's Story*, winner of a national book award. Also in June a special 2,000 Balloon Release ceremony remembered the MIAs.

Lavicka hopes that the state of Illinois will deed its two empty lots adjoining the memorial to the foundation. This would provide additional space for seating, meditation, and special programs. The foundation also needs donations for upkeep and improvements. "Otherwise, I'll just keep coming over to mow the lawn myself."

Whatever it takes, Bill Lavicka will see it through.

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