

Preserving a Community

Historic preservation consultant and architectural historian Deb Sheals



Deb Sheals

By Dianna Borsi O'Brien
Portrait by Carole Patterson

If you've had a cup of coffee in Kaldi's, rented a movie from Ninth Street Video or bought a T-shirt from Tiger Spirit, you've enjoyed the work of Deb Sheals.

These are just a few of the buildings that Sheals has worked on to make their historic renovations possible. But as Sheals, a historic preservation consultant and architectural historian, will tell you herself, she's not a building hugger.

"The best way to save a building is to put it to work," Sheals says. And that's just what she helps building owners do.

Tom Atkins of Atkins Investments has worked with Sheals on several projects including the Atkins City Centre, formerly the Strollway Building, which was known before that as the Virginia Building, as well as some less noticed projects such as the Hamilton-Brown Shoe Factory on Wilkes Boulevard, the Miller Building on Broadway and the Matthews Building next to it.

But he's no building hugger either. Prior to renovating the Ninth Street building, which he calls a downtown renaissance building, it had a 75 percent occupancy rate. Today, it is 100 percent rented. The Hamilton-Brown building? It had a 50 percent occupancy rate, and today it is 100 percent rented. In fact, it was Atkins' CPA who suggested he contact Sheals and renovate his buildings.

That's because Sheals is known for her expertise not only in renovating buildings but also in guiding property owners through the shoals and sandbars of state and federal historic tax credits. As Atkins will tell you: "It's not easy to get those tax credits. You have to think ahead, cover all your bases and know what you're doing. They are not throwing that money around."

More than once, Atkins says, he found himself at odds with Sheals when it came to renovating a building. "I like to break things down, do it in the simplest terms," he says. He'd tell her his plans, and she'd respond, "No, Tom, that's not what the state wants." As Atkins tells it, he never won any of those arguments. "There weren't any arguments. We did it her way."

Sheals isn't stubborn; she just knows her stuff. She's been doing historic preservation work since 1993. Her work has included

surveys or National Register designation for about 1,500 historic buildings. Sheals estimates more than 80 percent of her work is outside of Boone County.

At the state level, Tiffany Patterson, the state's National Register of Historic Places coordinator, called Sheals one of the state's most productive historic consultants. Patterson and others note Sheals' tireless efforts to keep the advantages of state and federal tax credits in front of legislators' minds.

It's this balance of concern for history and interest in the bottom line that has earned Sheals accolades from local business people. Susan Hart, vice president of Huebert Building, says the work her company did with Sheals on historic preservation projects, including the Berry Building and the 1020 Walnut St. building renovated by John Ott, saved her firm from having to lay anyone off during the recent construction slump.

"Deb is just a really practical, down to earth, great person," Hart says. For example, when historic preservation called for keeping the look of a garage door on the Coca-Cola Building, which now houses the Ragtag Cinema, Uprise Bakery and Ninth Street Video, Sheals worked with Hart to find a way to make it look like a garage door but function like a well-insulated wall where Ninth Street Video now operates.

Yet Sheals can be a stickler for details. When the building owners uncovered the brick, they wanted to keep it exposed. But Sheals explained that the building was once in a residential area, which is why it has a low profile, a fireplace and plaster over the brick. The original building owners would have been horrified with exposed brick — and so would historic preservationists. The brick is covered today, and the fireplace remains.

But Sheals isn't iron fisted. On a project, Hart says, Sheals will talk to everyone on the construction team; she helps them, guides them and teaches them why things have to be done the way they're done. "She balances the need to preserve architectural significance with the reality of building codes and budgets."



Building photos courtesy of Deb Sheals



Hart says she counts Sheals as one of her mentors and laughs as she recalls how Sheals dragged her down to Jefferson City to testify about the importance of the tax credits. "She cares and gets involved," Hart says.

Sheals' involvement at the local level includes being the founding member of the original chair of Columbia City Council's Historic Preservation Commission, which since 1998 has named 111 properties to its Notable Properties list.

Hart also pointed out another important facet of Sheals skills that benefits Columbia: She's the woman behind the desserts at Murry's Restaurant. For years, Sheals went and made the desserts each morning. Now, she still consults on desserts, which are all made with her recipes. Hart says Sheals shares her philosophy: Good desserts will keep people coming back.

But again, she's realistic. "You wouldn't be happy if you knew how many calories were in the Goey Butter Cake," Sheals says.

That's Sheals — always an eye on the bottom line, pun intended.

When Sheals points to the benefits of historic preservation, she notes that 43,150 jobs have been created or retained since the Missouri tax credits went into effect in 1998. This figure comes from a report from experts at St. Louis University published in March 2010 entitled, "An Evaluation of the Missouri Historic Preservation Tax Credit Program's Impact on Job Creation and Economic Activity Across the State."

But when you ask Sheals about her favorite project, that's when her passion for her work is revealed. "I love them all," Sheals says. "That's the fun of it."

Then, instead of pointing to the scores of National Register designations or countless beautiful buildings she helped restore, she reveals what she calls one of the most rewarding recent projects. Calling it a real charmer, Sheals describes the reclamation of Lincoln-Hubbard, a historically black high school in Sedalia, Mo. Today, it provides housing for low-income senior citizens, each classroom turned into a spacious apartment. It's one of the biggest buildings in that part of the city, Sheals says. "It had been vacant forever."

Today, the former empty building houses some of its former students. Sheals says when she saw it finished, she almost wept. "It's touching."

Because it's not about the building; it's not about the developers; it's about the community. And the best way to save a community is to put it to work.

Just ask Deb. Or Susan Hart. Or Tom Atkins. **CHL**

When you think **DIAMONDS**

think Buchroeder's.

