

Rochelle Riley: Small group doing big things for downtown Detroit development

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For all the great work Quicken Loans CEO Dan Gilbert is doing to transform Detroit's downtown, there's room for a hundred more warriors to turn the ghosts of the city's past into living, working vessels of the future.

David Di Rita and the Roxbury Group, a four-member team of Detroit devotees, are among the most dynamic of the warriors already here, and their fingerprints are showing up on an increasing number of projects around town.

The company has completed or begun three major projects, including the \$82-million restoration of the historic 19-story David Whitney Building at the south end of Grand Circus Park. Roxbury will make it home to a boutique hotel and condos by mid-2014.

"Everybody in this business has struggled for the past five years," said Di Rita, 49, who was born and raised in Detroit, received his degrees from the University of Michigan and now lives in Northville. "I found myself saying that after six years, we're an overnight success."

The team has been a welcome addition to the massive restoration of greater Detroit, says the man who holds the keys to most of that development.

"They're very creative, and they really do put a lot on the line, personally, to make a deal happen," said George Jackson, president and CEO of the Detroit Economic Growth Corp., which oversees development. "We could use a hundred more developers like them."

Roxbury's projects represent a tenth of the billion dollars in development overseen by the DEGC in the last three years.

The company exists because Di Rita, after years spent as an attorney at places including Visteon and Johnson Controls, decided he wanted to do something different.

Di Rita had been working for Stacy Fox, then a senior vice president at Visteon and an automotive powerhouse, who oversaw the development of Visteon's global headquarters.

When Di Rita left to found the Roxbury Group, Fox joined him. They knew they were taking a risk.

Fox had been watching the landscape for some time. The Ann Arbor native, who grew up in Dearborn, graduated from U-M and began her career as an assistant director of the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission. There, she worked on the only new money millage to pass in 1976. The money went for a new parks system.

"It's funny how things come full circle," said Fox, 59, who now surveys the landscape from her apartment at the Broderick and Roxbury's headquarters atop the Buhl building.

“I knew I had to do something other than build parks for the rest of my life,” she said.

Di Rita and Fox worked as the tenant representatives on One Kennedy Square, the home of Ernst & Young, and they learned Detroit, connecting with the Lower Woodward Housing Fund and other entities.

In 2005, Di Rita hung the shingle. Fox followed, but Di Rita chose the first office.

“He put our first office in the David Stott building, and in 2005, the David Stott building was pretty rough. We didn’t have an air conditioner. It was a little two-room office, no bathroom on the floor.”

As the company searched for its first project, it kept the lights on by doing smaller projects, such as the United Way’s new headquarters and a half dozen projects at TechTown. Within three years, the company grew by two, adding James Van Dyke as vice president of development and Vince Dattilo as project manager.

Van Dyke said he was “drawn to Detroit because of what was already going on. I heard of folks moving into old buildings.”

He and his brother, Peter, moved into the Merchants Apparel Building at the corner of East Grand River and Broadway and began taking photographs of buildings — not to renovate but, like typical twentysomethings, to put a bar on a first floor.

Dattilo was working for himself after having “traveled to Chicago, Milwaukee, Denver and several others cities to figure out what the secret sauce was if we were going to build the first loft development and residential development,” he said.

“After 1995 with Victoria Park, it became clear that residential was going to come back to the city after a 40-year period when no new residential building permits were pulled.”

And that’s when Roxbury’s story really began. The quartet found its first big project — new luxury condos above a parking structure at 115 Michigan Avenue between Washington Boulevard and Griswold near the Book Cadillac Hotel.

The project failed. But the moment was one of clarity, not despair.

“It was really after that project didn’t go forward that we decided to stay together,” Van Dyke said.

The team turned next to the Auburn, a 58-unit apartment building at Canfield and Cass avenues in Midtown. They completed it last October; it has a waiting list of 50 people.

Each of the quartet has had a moment that validated their mission, none more ironic than Fox’s.

Her daughter is finishing her senior year at Washington University in St. Louis and will work at Ernst & Young, in the building the partners helped acquire. Oh, and she’ll be living at the Auburn, their first project.

And Van Dyke, who moved to Detroit to live in an old building and own a bar? He lives in the Park Shelton high-rise with his fiancée and two children. With his partners, he co-owns the Buhl Bar, 25 stories below their spacious but spare headquarters overlooking the city.

“It takes a certain tenacity or insanity to want to stick it out,” Da Rita said.

“But this, for us anyway, is worth it, and it’s worth it because of what we’re able to accomplish. We’re paving a path for the kind of enterprise there should be more of, frankly.”

There’s room for a hundred more. Come on down.