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Joe Mahoney

# Creating New Possibilities for Urban Living



Miller (left) in front of the Lee School Lofts, an abandoned school converted into 40 apartments. More recent is his One Monument Avenue project, the former Stuart Circle Hospital (above).

12

**R**obin Miller's Richmond decade has been focused on the preservation and rejuvenation, through sound but creative business practices and more than a little risk-taking, of great buildings in old and often deteriorating urban precincts. Since he came to town, "tagging along as the unemployed spouse" of his wife, Nan, who had been hired as executive director of the Children's Museum of Richmond, Miller has seized a position a step ahead of the growing migration from the monotony of suburbia to the pleasures of city living.

Earlier this year, Miller was presented the first Ukrops/First Market Award for Preservation Excellence by ACORN, the Alliance to Conserve Old Richmond Neighborhoods. The award recognized a body of work that has helped transform city neighborhoods including the Fan, the Museum District, Oregon Hill, downtown, and Shockoe Bottom. And now he has leapt south into Old Manchester.

"He's taken on some very large projects in tough parts of the city and he's put together the money and the users," says Jennie Knapp, ACORN's executive director. "He has come up with projects that are anchors for the revival of these neighborhoods. Robin eschews the popular wisdom all the time. He adapts and makes things financially viable."

In 2000, Miller took the 1930s Johnston-Willis Hospital, which he bought at foreclosure, and turned it into 117 high-end apartments. In 2001, he transformed the Robert E. Lee School, a classic 1918 elementary school with huge windows, high ceilings, and an auditorium, into 40 unique apartments that will be sold eventually as condominiums.

"He has a knack for picking the low-hanging fruit that nobody seems to want and then showing everyone else that this can work," says Don Charles, executive director of the Historic Richmond Foundation. "Somebody else might have done what Robin did, leveraging tax credits so successfully to the benefit of his company

*By Rob Walker*

and the community, but his spirit and attitude regarding preservation has been truly wonderful."

Miller holds a bachelor's degree from the United States Military Academy and a master's degree in public policy from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, to go with certification as a professional engineer. His first rehabilitation projects were in the late 1970s in Cambridge, Mass., and Tarrytown, N.Y.

Miller's easy manner and resonant twang are reminders of his roots in Kingsport, Tenn., where after he developed a planned community with 200 homes, he was instrumental in revitalization of the city's old downtown.

He brought this broad education and a lot of curiosity and energy when he and Nan and their two children came to Richmond a decade ago. (She has since moved into a new job at the Science Museum of Virginia.) Miller studied the market and found there were plenty of good builders working in new construction while there were just a few pursuing his-

toric tax credit work. "I looked around and fell in love with the architecture. I love the old buildings and I love the challenges that come with them," he says. Though "urban renewal" and neglect had done substantial harm in Richmond, Miller found that, thanks to a hearty preservation community and a little good fortune, the city was blessed with a substantial stock of old buildings spanning from antebellum to Art Deco. By 1995, he took on his first project in Richmond, transforming three pre-Civil War townhouses into apartments.

This year he was joined on a spectacular sunny day by beaming city leaders in front of a capstone conversion known as One Monument Avenue, a luxury apartment project overlooking the statue of General J.E.B. Stuart that will feature a doorman and rents starting at \$1,500 a month. In a few years, it will go condo.

The three critical redevelopment tools that he has used are federal and state historic tax credits, and the Richmond Real Estate Tax Abatement Program. "With a combination of those, we can make some deals work that would not ordinarily work," he says.

Another piece of his successful redevelopment puzzle is having two entities – Miller Associates and Monroe Properties, a development company and a property management company. "I want my tenants to have the quality of service when they move in that matches the quality of the work we did on the buildings. The way to ensure that is to do it ourselves. We keep the customers happy and we keep the vacancy rates low."

Miller offers high praise for Claude Cooper, the city's building commissioner. While city building codes are not designed for rehabilitating older buildings, Cooper "understands this and is excellent at working with an architect to help develop modifications" that will suit the code and the building. "Without Claude Cooper most of my deals wouldn't have worked," Miller asserts.

In addition to unfriendly building codes, Miller says many of his projects face severe challenges in requirements posed by the Americans with Disabilities Act. "Probably a third of the old buildings in Richmond cannot be reused if those requirements are strictly enforced," Miller says. "We need some flexibility there."

Miller acknowledges that he is something of a missionary for urban revitalization. He teaches a course on adaptive reuse in Virginia Commonwealth University's



Miller purchased the Parsons House (top) from the state in 2000 and converted it into eight apartments.

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