

## **Coming back strong**

Activity on Hull Street elicits thoughts area ripe for resurgence

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Some are calling it the next Carytown. Others say it's Jackson Ward five years ago.

Despite its rundown appearance, developers view a stretch of Hull Street between Commerce Road and Jefferson Davis Highway in South Richmond as a historic gem ripe for a makeover.

They've begun renovating many of the century-old buildings into viable commercial and retail spaces on the street level and converting the upstairs lofts into apartments or condominiums.

Several art galleries may make Manchester's "Main Street" their home, as will as a few law offices. Croaker's Spot restaurant, a popular eatery in Jackson Ward, plans to open a second location near 10th Street.

A former bank building at 12th and Hull streets soon will be renovated into an apartment. A similar renovation took place across the street two years ago.

Walter Parks, an architect and developer, recently bought two adjacent buildings on the 1100 block with the help of the Alliance To Conserve Old Richmond Neighborhoods.

"I think we're probably a little early," Parks said about the area's turnaround. "Three to five years, and I think it'll be great."

Parks really didn't get two buildings. He got a three-story brick facade that has been reinforced to prevent a collapse. The building has no roof or floors.

The "interior" isn't inside at all and looks more like 1941 London than 2007 Richmond. A toilet sits exposed to the elements. The edges of the building smell strongly of urine. Potato-chip bags and used diapers prove somebody made this a home, at least temporarily.

Within a year, however, Parks hopes the building and its adjacent neighbor will be renovated into a first-floor office space and second- and third-story apartments.

A few blocks away, Paul Iwashchenko has placed plywood over the glass door to what looks like a vacant store. A hardware store sign hangs above the barricade.

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Iwashchenko pushes aside the wood to reveal a cavernous woodworking/metalworking shop with saws and drills. He's been using the shop to build components for projects up and down the street, including a bank-turned-banquet hall and apartment.

He recently put a roof on a small Hull Street warehouse that will house a plumbing supply company later in March.

"I started investing in Carver, then Jackson Ward, then Church Hill. Now they're all too expensive," he said. "We're buying everything we can get our hand on over here."

The price of properties along this stretch of Hull Street has tripled in the past three years, Iwashchenko said.

"We're expecting it to start popping now or next year," Iwashchenko said, referring to more development activity and more tenants moving in.

Kelvin Hanson, who has developed many properties in Jackson Ward, plans to start restoring a three-story brick building on Hull near 10th Street and connect it to a new building that will match the area's architectural style.

That project, called Old Manchester Plaza, will add 50 apartments and the second Croaker's Spot restaurant.

"You've got a lot of employers over there -- Sun Trust, UPS [formerly Overnite Transportation]. And people are moving into the lofts at Plant Zero. It needs a restaurant," Hanson said.

In interviews with more than a dozen developers and store owners, nobody is sure when Hull Street's dozens of storefronts will once again house businesses. But they all agree that the hundreds of new residents will help lure more shops.

Some of those residents might come from warehouses-turned condos in other parts of Manchester.

Justin French, who developed the Corrugated Box building and the Parachute Factory lofts in Manchester's warehouse district, recently started construction on the Tobacco Factory. Located on a full city block of Commerce Street between Everett and Stockton streets, the project will add 225 apartments and 30,000 square feet of commercial space.

Robin Miller owns much of the land -- or 30 acres -- between Hull Street and the James River. He's refurbished 17 homes and plans to add between 300 and 400 condos and apartment units depending upon market conditions, he said.

Developers and homeowners say the area's renaissance started when the city demolished the Blackwell housing project in 1999 and replaced it with the Hope XI program.

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So far, Hope XI, which is a partnership between the city and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, has built 160 apartments. The project also calls for 188 single-family homes.

That change, coupled with Hull Street's stock of historic buildings, has made investors flock to the area.

"It's the last urban area of Richmond that has really interesting architecture close to downtown," said Tom Robinson, who owns and sells property in the area, including the former Light House diner at Hull and 13th streets.

Hull Street was the main commercial strip for Manchester, the former seat of Chesterfield County. It was an independent city until 1910, when it was annexed by Richmond.

Many of the buildings were built between 1866 and 1917.

It remained a thriving area until the 1960s, when shoppers from nearby neighborhoods started driving farther away.

By the 1980s, the buildings became mostly vacant and in disrepair.

Residents and developers agree that a police substation would help the area rebound even faster. There's also talk about the city renovating and expanding the Manchester Courthouse.

Store owners say they've waited decades for more business.

"Things are about to change," said Carolyn Allen, who owns an eyeglasses shop on Hull Street. "Residents are going to start coming. . . . I hope there's more foot traffic so I won't have to be such a destination location."

That about matches the wishes of area resident Jason Hall, who recently bought a home at Jefferson Davis Highway and Porter Street.

"I want to be able to walk over there, shop and go out to eat at restaurants."