

PEOPLE SAVING PLACES

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FINDING DUBUQUE

An Iowa city redisCOVERS its sense of place

THE RICHARD H. DRIEHAUS FOUNDATION NATIONAL PRESERVATION AWARDS

ART OF THE EVERYDAY IN SAN FRANCISCO





Dubuque, Iowa, residents have poured efforts into reviving the city's historical character

by Lisa Selin Davis

Photography by
Matthew Gilson

HEART & SOUL

On a sweltering May afternoon, a select group of around 30 of Dubuque, Iowa's business, nonprofit, and government leaders gathered at the home of Andy and Debi Butler, a renovated Shingle Style house with a majestic view of the Mississippi River. Amid homemade chicken salad, Paleo chocolate chip cookies, and unbridled enthusiasm, they described what Dubuque was like before and after the city's Town Clock Building was restored in 2002.

It was as if the midcentury enamel siding, removed from the brick Italianate building, lifted a cloud off Dubuque with it. Never, in 15 years of writing about historic preservation, had I heard so many people utter the words "historic tax credits" with such passion and reverence.

They may have been giving me the hard sell, but I was already sold. The day before, I had seen preservation projects in this city of around 58,000 with Debi Butler and Duane Hagerty, CEO of local preservation nonprofit HeritageWorks. The tour helped me understand the unusually deep and detailed public-private partnerships that are making Dubuque a model of economic development and community revitalization.

As impressive as these buildings are, just as impressive is the preservation fever that has taken hold of the city. Preservation projects are creating ripple effects—bringing in new blood, welcoming long-lost Dubuquers home, and encouraging people from all over the city to participate in the salvation of historic Dubuque.

Anyone can restore a building. But Dubuque residents, together, are restoring a community.



DUBUQUE, IOWA'S OLDEST city, sits on the Mississippi River at the point where Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois meet, on land originally inhabited by the Meskwaki people. It takes its name from French fur trader Julien Dubuque, who settled permanently in the area in 1785. The city contains a wonderfully intact selection of historic architecture, including blocks of Italianate commercial buildings downtown, Victorian-era painted ladies perched along the river bluffs, and gargantuan late 19th- and early 20th-century industrial structures in the Millwork District.

After almost 200 years of prosperity stemming from thriving logging, millworking, and manufacturing businesses, Dubuque suffered a series of setbacks. These included the 1965 Mississippi River flood; exclusion from the Interstate highway system; and 1970s and '80s recessions, when local unemployment skyrocketed to 23 percent. Between 1980 and 1990, 7.8 percent of the population fled. In 1985, when 55 percent of downtown's storefronts were vacant, a local newspaper asked, "Will the last person to leave Dubuque please turn out the lights?"

Though the city's brief fling with urban renewal led to the de-

struction of three entire downtown blocks, it spurred the City Council to establish a Historic Preservation Ordinance in 1977 and a Historic Preservation Commission two years later. Dubuque now has five historic districts with a total of 1,317 properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places, either individually or as a contributing property to a historic district.

But much of that remaining historic fabric was in bad shape by 1999, when Andy Butler's father, John—executive chairman of the Dubuque-based insurance firm Cottingham & Butler (C&B)—purchased the deteriorating Town Clock Building. It was across the street from C&B's headquarters, a restored Beaux-Arts former department store built around 1896.

The Town Clock Building was constructed in 1872, but the 58-foot clock atop it was removed in 1971 as part of the city's urban renewal. At some point, the building was covered in powder blue enamel siding by local business leader Louis Pfohl in an attempt at modernization. It had been vacant for 14 years when C&B stepped in.

John Butler considered demolishing it to construct glass-and-steel offices for C&B's expanding workforce. But first, he asked

Historic tax credits covered 45 percent of renovation costs, and 18 months later one of Dubuque's most memorable buildings was restored.



Previous: Workers on the scaffolding outside the former St. Mary's Catholic Church at Steeple Square. *Opposite:* The Security Building, headquarters of Cottingham & Butler. *This page, from left:* John and Mary Gronen in their office at the Schmid Innovation Center; Debi and Andy Butler, with the Town Clock Building in the background.

John Gronen, president of Gronen Restoration, to take a look. Gronen started to preserve Four Mounds, his family's former estate along the Mississippi River, in 1987. The related Four Mounds Foundation had become a de facto restoration-trades training ground for Dubuque youth. Gronen and local architect Jeff Morton had tried, unsuccessfully, to save the old Merchant's Hotel in downtown Dubuque in the late 1990s, and he brought Morton along on his Town Clock Building visit.

Inside, Gronen says, the Town Clock Building "was stacked with stuff, from the basement to the third floor—anything you can think of, from mattresses to an old motorcycle." But as they peeked beneath the enamel siding, they discovered a "damaged but beautiful" brick-and-limestone facade, with a cast-iron-and-wood storefront and a metal cornice. It was a game-changer.

"With some minor work on the facade and some major work on the building, we thought, 'We can make this a spectacular office,'" says Andy Butler, who serves as vice chairman of C&B.

The cost to restore the 23,956-square-foot building was close to 20 percent more than a demo and rebuild. Gronen asked a Wisconsin historic property developer, The Alexander Company, for advice on lowering the cost. That's when he discovered the full potential of historic tax credits (HTCs). "We learned a lot, very fast," Gronen says.

HTCs covered 45 percent of renovation costs, and 18 months later one of Dubuque's most memorable buildings was restored.

It now houses 96 of C&B's 638 Dubuque employees. (The building remains structurally sound enough to hold the clock tower again, should the city ever want to move it back.)

It was Dubuque's first large-scale historic tax credit project; in fact, it was the first of 44 over the next 16 years. "You do one project, and everybody understands that it can be done," says Morton, who served as the architect for the restoration.

In 2004, Heartland Financial, a local financial services company, used HTCs to renovate two downtown buildings rather than moving into a tech park in south Dubuque as previously planned. "The historic tax credits made it financially possible to make it all work," says Lynn B. Fuller, executive operating chairman of Heartland Financial.

"Both of those projects showed people that there was life for these buildings," Gronen says.

Meanwhile, Gronen's company bought and restored six boarded-up buildings on Upper Main Street, converting them to 14 retail storefronts at street level with 30 affordable apartments. The \$6-million-plus project, partially funded by HTCs, now contains a bookstore, two restaurants, a quilt shop, a popcorn store, a cafe, and offices.

"It got people excited when they realized the connection between preservation and economic development," says Gronen. The fever continued to spread. Schools, banks, row houses, and the historic Hotel Julien, owned by descendants of Louis Pfahl, were restored

The Dubuque community is finding ways to create and nurture a new generation of preservationists.



From left: Duane Hagerty inside the steeple of the old St. Mary's church, now an events center at Steeple Square; Adam Schwendinger and Becca Kacanda cleaning a stained-glass window. *Opposite:* The Gothic Revival church was built in 1867.

and renovated, many using HTCs and local incentive programs. “We’re undoing a lot of what my grandfather did,” says Tony Pfahl, Louis’ grandson, whose company restored several other buildings, removing more of the infamous enamel siding in the process.

In 2006, Gronen and his wife, Mary, made what they called an “emotional purchase.” They bought a 186,000-square-foot former Caradco window and door factory in the Millwork District. After five years of planning and 15 months of renovations, the \$33.5 million mixed-use project opened. The building has long halls with polished floors and soaring ceilings, a sunny courtyard and shops, and space for nonprofits and artists in the basement and loft apartments above. Like other Gronen Restoration projects, it contains a “credit wall” that mentions everyone involved in the project, from plumbers to politicians.

MEANWHILE, IN 2009, IBM started scouting the region for office space. Community revitalization nonprofit Dubuque Initiatives, Gronen Restoration, and other city leaders identified the mostly vacant nine-story former Roshek’s department store as a top candidate. Together, they worked tirelessly on a proposal to rehab it using HTCs, and IBM came in as a tenant on four floors. In the end, the \$46 million project achieved a LEED Platinum rating, the U.S. Green Building Council’s highest for environmentally sound buildings.

The Roshek’s project highlighted a need for more housing downtown to attract a younger workforce. During my visit, Debi But-

ler and Duane Hagerty more than once mentioned trying to draw “hipsters” to Dubuque. “We need more young people,” Debi said.

That’s why the Dubuque community is finding ways to create and nurture a new generation of preservationists. Steeple Square, a former Catholic church, convent, rectory, and school complex that takes up a square block in the city’s Washington neighborhood, is a prime example.

Gronen’s company rehabbed the school into four market-rate apartments and eight affordable apartments for formerly homeless women who have graduated from programs run by Opening Doors, a local nonprofit. The rectory will become a daycare center. The church, still in mid-restoration but usable, is now a popular event space.

Four Mounds Foundation had already been helping to train young people in construction skills for years as a leading partner in a program called Housing Education and Rehabilitation Training (HEART). Hagerty and Chris Olson, the foundation’s executive director, tried a similar approach at Steeple Square. Inspired by artisans from Chicago and Aurora, Illinois, who restored the church’s first two windows in 2015 with student help, they tapped local craftspeople to learn preservation trades and then become trainers of unemployed or under-employed Dubuquers.

“For the trainers, we looked at people who were woodworkers or artists, people who would be able to work with fine and historic materials,” Olson says.

So far, they’ve drafted more than 25 locals to be trainers, and 24 windows have been restored.





One of those locals was Craig Beytien, who had recently left a job in educational publishing and was a “closet carpenter” when Hagerty approached him in the fall of 2017. “He said, ‘Hey, I like your work. Are you interested in working with us at Steeple Square?’” Beytien recalls.

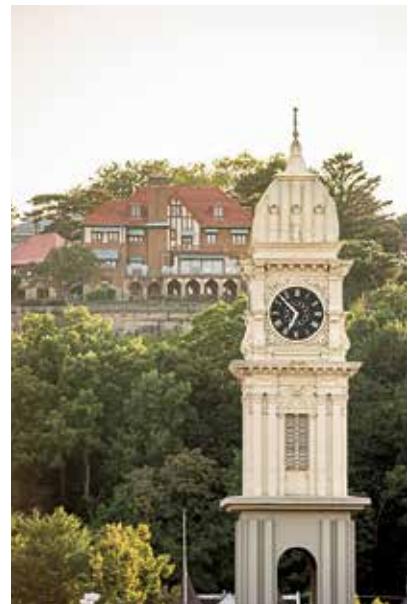
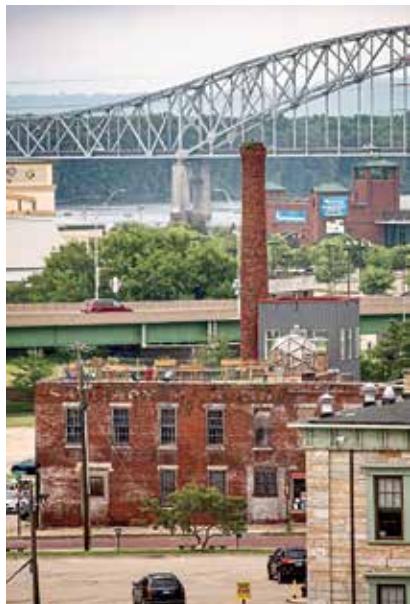
He agreed, thinking it would be a short-term engagement. More than a year later he was still there, having gained experience in fixing the dry-rotted wooden window frames and other building elements. “Some of those skills I brought with me; others I developed as needed. And I borrowed any advice I could get from anyone else I could think of,” he says. Then he began to teach others.

Encouraged by the success of this program, Northeast Iowa Community College started working with HeritageWorks, Four Mounds, and Steeple Square to develop preservation-trades training programs for NICC’s students and create a Restoration Academy. It hopes to offer the first courses this fall.

On the day I visited Steeple Square, Chris Olson’s husband, Tim, a photographer and painter who has also become a trainer, was working with a young man named Adam Schwendinger, trying to carefully slice curves into thin sheets of glass. “Where was this program when I was in high school?” Schwendinger asked.

Caprice Jones, director and founder of Dubuque’s Fountain of Youth Program, a nonprofit aiming to “change mindsets that contribute to generational poverty,” has sent many of the program’s participants to Steeple Square. “It’s an opportunity for our individuals to be exposed to something totally unique,” he says. People who have worked on window restoration, he adds, have the chance “to repair them, to learn about them, to enjoy them. It teaches them history.” And it gives them references for future jobs, leading to a butterfly effect throughout the community.

Beytien caught such a fever that he ended up buying a 5,500-square-foot 1890s building on Central Avenue that had



Opposite: The former Caradco window and door factory now houses loft apartments and the Schmid Innovation Center, which mixes retail, commercial, and nonprofit tenants. **This page, clockwise from near left:** The old Town Clock now tops an archway downtown; rooftops showcase Dubuque's architectural diversity; The Julien Dubuque Bridge forms a backdrop to The Smokestack.

been abandoned. He's renovating it to include three apartments and a storefront and workshop called Upcycle Dubuque, where he and others will make furniture and other products using reclaimed materials. So far, he has worked with more than a dozen of Fountain of Youth's participants—many released from prison or living in halfway houses—creating wine cabinets and end tables from decommissioned wooden electric boxes. Fountain of Youth then sells them at the local farmers market.

The comprehensiveness of this endeavor was exactly Hagerty's vision; part of HeritageWorks' mission is to help feed historic preservation into the city's aquifers, so the upsides spill out everywhere. "It's all planned to have as broad a benefit as possible," he says.

THE FEVER IS felt at all corners of the community. Artists have decorated old buildings with murals, giving them new life. The city has set up programs to encourage historic pres-

ervation and home ownership. People who left Dubuque long ago have come back to visit family, bought houses, and stayed.

And then there are the newcomers. Susan Price was a lifelong Brooklynite with ancestral roots in Iowa, and her husband, Scott Cornwell, had been a New Yorker since he'd left Wisconsin at age 9. They were driving through Dubuque on a road trip in 2013 when they passed through the Millwork District.

"We just fell in love," says Price. Having grown up in historic neighborhoods in New York City, they'd seen preservation's benefits, and watched New York's formerly industrial neighborhoods such as SoHo and Dumbo transformed into arts-centric meccas. "We thought, my God, the same thing is happening here," Price says. "Wouldn't it be fun if we were part of it?" Though they had never been so impulsive before, within six weeks they had found an 1856 industrial building that had mostly been used for storage since the 1980s.

Seventeen years after the Town Clock Building's restoration, Dubuque has added more than 2,000 jobs in buildings that have been restored or rehabbed.



The bluffs on the south side of the city provide a view of the Mississippi River and downtown Dubuque.

The Smokestack, as it's now called, sits on a former Native American burial mound. (The mound was leveled by the city in 1852. Native American remains and artifacts were excavated at the time, but their locations are unknown today, according to Price, a former historian who assiduously researched the building's past.) The structure was a four-story hotel until 1918, and then served as a dairy and a motorcycle dealership, among other uses. By 1962, it had been converted to a two-story building, and the namesake smokestack was added. "It's an insanely weird-looking property, but it was a property that was calling us to Dubuque," Price says.

The project was not eligible for HTCs, but Cornwell and Price did receive a \$75,000 grant from the Iowa Economic Development Authority for their work on the tower, as well as tax increment financing and other funding from the city. Cornwell, a musician with extensive construction and carpentry experience, did most of the work himself. The property is now a nightclub, gastropub, and community arts space, as well as an emerging partner site with Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area. Price and Cornwell plan to pursue a listing on the National Register. I was there on a Wednesday night—Salsa night—and the place was hopping.

People like Price and Cornwell, who create projects that complement the bigger preservation projects happening in Dubuque, are integral to the city's preservation success. As Price says, "Little things connect the big things."

Seventeen years after the Town Clock building's restoration, Dubuque has added more than 2,000 jobs in buildings that have been restored or rehabbed. The city's unemployment rate has fallen to around 2 percent, about half the national rate. Since 2000, the 44 federal and state HTC projects in Dubuque have spurred more than \$600 million in additional downtown development. According to Dan LoBianco, executive director of Dubuque Main Street, the number of underdeveloped properties is half of what it was in 2000.

Though more than 20 additional preservation projects are planned or in progress, there are still plenty of vacancies, including a 120-year-old brewery complex in an area known as the Far North Side that local leaders hope a developer will salvage and transform into live/work space. "We have over a million square feet of large buildings that need top-to-bottom renovations," Gronen says. "We have a lot more work to do in downtown Dubuque."

Gronen emphasizes that each of the completed projects were the result of massive community mobilization. They may have been the work of developers, but scores of other people poured their hearts and souls into them. He's right that the work isn't done yet. But the lights in Dubuque are on, and shining bright. □

LISA SELIN DAVIS is a frequent contributor to *Preservation*. Her most recent story for the magazine was on Stanley Marketplace in Aurora, Colorado, in the Summer 2018 issue.