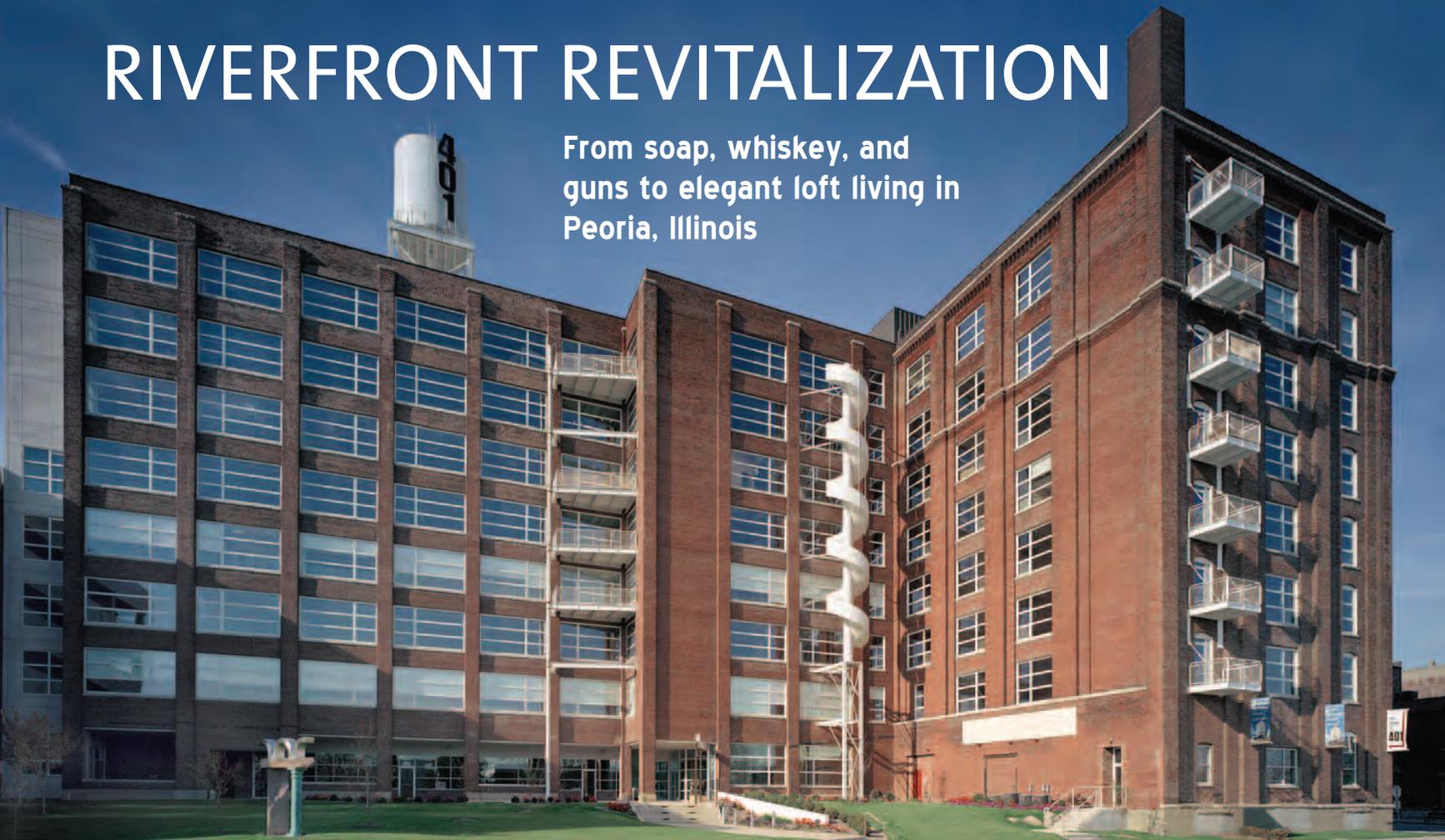


RIVERFRONT REVITALIZATION

From soap, whiskey, and guns to elegant loft living in Peoria, Illinois



by JAMES KEMPER

Peoría, Illinois, has a rich and colorful history that dates to the mid-1600s when pioneers first began to settle along the Illinois River, a tributary of the Mississippi. With convenient access to river and rail transportation, Peoria's riverfront district was destined to become a bustling hub of industrial activity, with brick warehouses that date to the 19th and early 20th centuries lining the waterfront.

As in many cities throughout the country, however, Peoria's development migrated to the suburbs throughout much of the last century and the riverfront district fell into disrepair. The turn-of-the-century Larkin Soap Building, located at 401 Water Street, was no exception.

The 401 Water Street building, once a charming brick loft warehouse, was built in 1905 by the Larkin Soap Company of New York. It was later sold to Hiram Walker, who used the building to store whiskey barrels. The warehouse continued to change hands over the years, at one point even serving as a training facility for the city's police SWAT team. Ultimately, it stood vacant for 15 years, until a vision of bringing new life to the long-neglected riverfront community began to take shape.

A compelling challenge

A timely connection between a developer/builder, the city, and PSA-

Dewberry — as both architect/engineer and prospective lead office tenant — helped move the 401 Water Street project from concept to reality. Huber Brothers Corporation, a Peoria-based general contracting company, saw promise in the project as a mixed-use building ideal for housing loft condominiums, offices, and ground-level retail.

At the same time, PSA-Dewberry was looking to relocate its headquarters from the Peoria suburbs into the city. The firm saw the project as a natural fit. It would provide the creative, open studio space the designers had been seeking. Equally important, the restoration work itself would prove a provocative and challenging assignment to underscore PSA-Dewberry's interest in sustainable design and urban revitalization. The relocation would also signal a strong commitment to the city of Peoria, where the firm had been located for nearly 50 years.

The project was also instrumental to the planning objectives of city leaders, who envisioned a renewed cultural district along the waterfront, with shops, restaurants, homes, and businesses. The city had finalized its Riverfront Business District Development Plan in 1995, and the 401 Water Street project would bring much-needed residential and commercial investment into the district while serving as a key revitalization model from a design and development standpoint. In 1999, the city

Left: The 401 Water Street building, once a charming brick loft warehouse, was built in 1905 by the Larkin Soap Company of New York. PSA-Dewberry's renovation design created 124,000 square feet of commercial office space, 50,000 square feet of loft-style condominium space, street-level space for retail businesses, and a commons area for the residences. The 42 homes in the building vary from 650 square feet to 3,500 square feet, and feature soaring 13-foot ceilings and balconies overlooking the river.

Right: The dynamic, award-winning space has retained much of its industrial character, while accommodating a variety of condominium dwellings that range from traditional to ultra-modern. Architectural challenges included shifting the building's front entry to the waterfront from the other side of the building.

sponsored a competitive process for the redevelopment of the building, ultimately selecting the redevelopment plan and design concept proposed by the Huber Brothers/PSA-Dewberry team.

A centerpiece project

PSA-Dewberry's renovation design created 124,000 square feet of commercial office space, 50,000 square feet of loft-style condominium space, street-level space for retail businesses, and a commons area for the residences. The 42 homes in the building vary from 650 square feet to 3,500 square feet, and feature soaring 13-foot ceilings and balconies overlooking the river.

The dynamic, award-winning space has retained much of its industrial character, while accommodating a variety of condominium dwellings that range from traditional to ultra-modern. Architectural challenges included shifting the building's front entry to the waterfront from the other side of the building — a gesture the design and development team believed vital to enhancing the integrity of the waterfront promenade. The team also preserved green space nestled between the building and the water, avoiding the temptation to convert this space to tenant parking — which was then addressed through the addition of a parking deck.

The challenges of retrofitting the aging building to meet 21st-century technology demands were aided by a century-old design measure — 401 Water Street had originally been constructed as a fireproof structure. As was typical for buildings of that era, this meant the maple floors throughout the warehouse rested atop a layer of cinders placed above the concrete flooring base. During the restoration, the designers converted this cinder base into a technology trough, running system infrastructure through the now obsolete middle layer without disturbing the original hardwood floor surface.

Demolition and construction began in 1999, and the restoration was completed in 2002. PSA-Dewberry's 90-person Peoria office staff now occupies the seventh and eighth floors of the commercial side of the building. The sales and leasing efforts for the condominium units and commercial spaces were extremely successful. Building amenities include a coffee shop, a restaurant, stores, and an art studio.

The project has been widely recognized, both for its design and its role as a catalyst in enlivening the district. Recently, 401 Water Street earned an Honor Award from the American Institute of Architects' Central Illinois chapter.

As one of the first developments to move forward along the riverfront, 401 Water Street has served as a transformative project for the burgeoning cultural district that city officials had hoped to create. Additional restoration projects have followed suit, bringing a television station, restaurants, and other stores and businesses to the area. New buildings



also have begun to appear, including the Riverfront Village development and the Riverplex Recreation and Fitness Center. The district's new "Festival Park" hosts entertainment and recreational activities, and includes two public marinas.

To date, more than \$160 million has been invested in Peoria's riverfront redevelopment. The area has become a vibrant architectural and historic district, reclaiming its status as a center of commerce and culture in Central Illinois. ✪

JAMES KEMPER is a senior designer with PSA-Dewberry. He has designed many award-winning projects across the nation, including both new facilities and renovations.