

State Historic Tax Credits Help Save Tuscaloosa's Drish House

(Mobile, Alabama) When the owner of the Drish House, Nika McCool, says the building is a fascinating piece of Tuscaloosa's history, she is making an understatement of the highest order. The historic structure has known equal parts adversity and prosperity in its 180 years and has been saved from the wrecking ball at least twice.

It was built in 1837 as a grand residence for Tuscaloosa physician John R. Drish, combining the Greek Revival and Italianate architectural styles popular at the time. It would serve successive residents until 1906, when it became a public school for Tuscaloosa's children. The dark days of the Great Depression would see the majestic structure converted to an auto parts warehouse for the Tuscaloosa Wrecking Company. This indignity is mitigated somewhat by a remarkable image captured by Depression-era photographer Walker Evans, who traveled the country in the 30s documenting the effects of the Depression on rural America. This photograph is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.



Credit: Walker Evans, 1936

Things improved for the Drish House when it was purchased by Southside Baptist Church in 1940. After another half century, however, the church began to struggle and an application was made to demolish the once grand building. Fortunately, according to McCool, the church could not afford the demolition, so it was leased to the Heritage Commission of Tuscaloosa County. Subsequent years of deferred maintenance



Drish House in 2013

and Hurricane Katrina took a toll, causing the Drish House to fall into such disrepair that it was added to the Alabama Historical Commission's "Places in Peril" list. By this time, McCool says there was significant water damage. So much in fact, that she was afraid the building could not be saved. But, she says, "I looked at my husband and said, 'this might be crazy, but I think we can be the people to save the house.'"

"The more I learned about the house, the more I realized it needed to be saved."

McCool had just finished a much easier renovation of a historic house near the University of Alabama campus that she converted into much-needed student housing. She wasn't sure she wanted to tackle another one right away, especially one in such desperate disrepair. "The more I learned about the house, however, the more I realized it needed to be saved." She could not walk away.

McCool, you see, has a Masters degree in history. She understands the value of preserving our past. "We've lost so much around Tuscaloosa, that I felt we needed to draw a line in the sand right here and say we're going to preserve what's left." Though she had been a stay-at-home-mom for 20 years, she

knew about the Federal Historic Tax Credits, which were critical to the renovation of her first project. The Drish House, however, was infinitely more challenging. It was in much worse condition and in a less desirable neighborhood. There was simply too much risk. But when the Alabama legislature passed the State Historic Tax Credit program in 2013, McCool could suddenly make the numbers work.

McCool purchased the Drish House from the Tuscaloosa Historic Preservation Society in 2013 and, with help from her husband Matt and their four sons, began renovating the building for its next life as an event venue. The process has been sobering at times. McCool occasionally comes across an original handmade nail, or some other remarkable architectural detail. They are reminders of the skilled craftsmen who spent years building the house and who, in 1837 would have been slaves. "We've lost their names to history, but the least we can do to honor their legacy of craftsmanship is to preserve that work. This house can serve as a memorial to those artisans."

The State Historic Tax Credits were key to McCool's ability and willingness to undertake such a challenging renovation. "This program allows ordinary families like ours to tackle a project like this," she says. "All of the current ordinances, codes, zoning and life safety requirements were created for new construction, and nothing about renovating a 180 year old house fits that model." It's almost always

"Our story is written in these historic buildings just as surely as it is written in the text books"

more expensive and time consuming to renovate a historic building than construct a new one. Tax credits and, according to McCool, "extraordinary stubbornness" can help fill that gap.

The state tax credit program has expired and is currently in the Alabama legislature for renewal. Statewide, the \$60 million

program has generated nearly \$400,000,000 in private investment, and has revitalized more than 39 historic treasures -- all in less than three years. If the tax credit program is not renewed (and its future is far from certain), the state stands to lose an estimated \$4.00 in new tax revenue for every tax dollar invested over the next 20 years. A summary of the economic impact study may be found [here](#).

The first event in the newly renovated Drish House is scheduled for May...a wedding. However, the "halo" effect of the renovation is being felt long before the bride walks down the aisle. A gym and a new craft brewery have opened in the struggling neighborhood, and joggers have largely replaced the homeless people McCool once saw daily. "We're determined to bring the neighborhood back," she adds.



Drish House today: Architect Butch Grimes and General Contractor Jeffrey Harless

As for those who sometimes question the wisdom of, or indeed even the need for preserving Alabama's historic buildings when constructing something new on a vacant piece of land is so much easier, McCool does not hesitate. "Our story as a state and a people is a powerful story that needs to be preserved. We owe that to the people who went before us. Our story is written in these historic buildings just as surely as it's written in the text books." If McCool has her way, the story of the Drish House will persevere for another 180 years, to be experienced by generations yet to come.

###