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Gabe's Reimagined: A Multi-Use Renovation of an Abandoned Hotel

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Gabe's
Reimagined
Alissa Ramburger
University of Kentucky
Senior Thesis
2016
GABE’S REIMAGINED: A MULTI-USE RESTORATION PROJECT OF AN ABANDONED HOTEL

Using design to transform the negative image of a building into a structure that honors the history and accomplishments of its city
The building, named Gabe’s Tower after owner and public figure Gabe Fiorella, was once an icon of Owensboro. Unfortunately, due to population growth southward and the opening of a rival hotel downtown (The Executive Inn), Gabe’s Tower was unable to remain open. It has since undergone many different ownerships, each of which have struggled to remain profitable. The building has remained vacant for years and therefore has been subjected to becoming a location for crime. This has produced a very negative image for the building and the surrounding area. This negative image drives the purpose of this project. Through the revitalization efforts, this project will work to reverse this negative image and promote economic growth. These are two goals that must remain at the forefront of this project to enable its success.
The project will aim to revitalize and re-design Gabe’s Tower into a multi-use structure that promotes the following goals: create a safe and welcoming environment; immerse occupants in the rich history; and provide opportunities for growth in the community.

Despite the building’s negative image, there is large community support for the restoration of this building. The project will highlight design concepts originally enacted by Gabe himself and also highlight the overall culture and atmosphere that is unique to Owensboro. The project will expand on the original functions of the building to become a multi-use structure that will provide opportunities to remain profitable even in low demand seasons.

By developing Gabe’s Tower into a multi-use structure, the community will be enabled to be involved and experience this icon once again. The project will examine many aspects of hospitality design to develop the best solution for revitalization. The project will program spaces of design opportunities for each floor of Gabe’s Tower, but emphasis will be placed on the restaurant level.
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RESEARCH & PROGRAMMING
This phase of the project focuses on diving into the rich history behind this iconic structure. It will examine the history behind Gabe Fiorella and Owensboro, defining the factors unique to each.

This phase will incorporate insight from locals to influence the outcome of the revitalization efforts. Insight was gathered through a survey of various generations with various lengths of residency within Owensboro and Daviess County. It was important to include Daviess County within the demographics because of the culture within the city of Owensboro. While there are many people within the city limits, there are also several that live in neighboring towns but still contribute to, interact with, and influence the community of Owensboro.

Incorporating local opinion is critical to the success of the revitalization efforts. While there already is some support for this revitalization, the project must be seen as positive and beneficial in the long run economically. There is strong appeal, simply for preserving history, but the project must be supported on more than just nostalgic support. Therefore, research into demographics and site analysis are important components of this project.

With over 65,000 square feet, programming was also a crucial phase of the project. Programming for this project delved into building codes, LEED specifications, occupancy loads, and user groups for the various spaces of the project. Programming also includes evaluation of the past uses of the space. In addition to this evaluation, preliminary spatial planning occurred as a means of deciding minimum square footage requirements for every space within the building.

In addition to spatial planning, user and client analysis are important in defining the areas or spaces of focus for the project. The spaces were chosen based on how well they would satisfy the economic need of space as well as enrich the history. Overall, this phase serves as the foundation of the project.
Historical Overview of Gabe’s Tower

Designed by R. Ben Johnson, Gabe’s Tower was built in Owensboro, Kentucky in 1963. This round-shaped building was the first of its type to be constructed in Owensboro and also the tallest at the time of its construction. A $1,400,000 enterprise, Gabe’s Tower brought to life the dreams of Gabe Fiorella Sr. and James C. Ellis.

The owner, architect, builder, and decorator were all residents of Owensboro. In addition, nearly 92% of the materials used in the construction and furnishing of Gabe’s Tower were purchased within the Owensboro trading area.

This towering cylinder of steel-reinforced concrete presents an imposing appearance to visitors as they approach the city. With 13 floors and a 175 foot beacon light, Gabe’s Tower is visible some five miles in any direction.

The overall concept of Gabe’s Tower focused around modified Italian furnishings used in a contemporary vein to reflect the personality of Gabe Fiorella, Sr. The exterior view was also an important consideration for the design. Every room contained an exterior wall allowing for such a view.

Gabe’s Tower had a reputation for friendly hospitality that was delivered with some Kentucky style.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Gabe’s Tower Built</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Gabe’s Tower Sold to Owensboro Business College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Gabe’s Tower Converted to Best Western</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Gabe’s Tower Shuttered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Gabe’s Tower Reopened by Tower Motor Inn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Gabe’s Tower Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Gabe’s Tower Bought by Pennsylvania Investor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Hi neighbor! It’s a wonderful world!” -Gabe Fiorella, Sr.

The phrase above comprised the keystone of Gabe’s philosophy and his overall personality. He was known for his accomplishments as a restaurateur, but with everything he did, he brought a bit of fame to Owensboro.

Gabe had an effervescent personality and a mind that could envision the future as much as it delved into the problems of the present. He became a symbol of innovation for the city.
DEMOGRAPHICS
DAVIESS COUNTY, KENTUCKY

Population: 98,275 (2014 estimate)
Area: 458.35 square miles (2010)
Persons per square mile: 210.9 (2010)
Average household size: 2.5
Per capita income: $23,140 (2014)

POPULATION DISTRIBUTION

Female: 51.5% (2014)
Male: 48.5% (2014)

INCOME DISTRIBUTION

Less than $10,000
$10,000 to $24,999
$25,000 to $49,999
$50,000 to $99,999
$100,000 to $199,999
$200,000 or more

Note: American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander are too small a percentage to be visible on graph.
SITE ANALYSIS
GABE’S TOWER

- Local Businesses
- Healthcare
- Education
- Parks
- Churches
- Hotels
- Gabe’s Tower

USER ANALYSIS

LOCALS

Want a unique experience to celebrate their community culture

BUSINESS

Small business looking to make an impact on the community

VISITORS

Visiting for family or business and looking for a unique experience
DEFINING QUALITIES OF OWENSBORO

Crossroads kind of city
Wonderful small town full of hospitality
Small town atmosphere
Sports
Barbeque
Great place to live
River
History
Warm feeling that surrounds you when you visit
Family
Bluegrass
Diversity
Endless possibilities
Great place to raise a family
Hometown feel
Small business
The following is an article by Save Gabe's founder John Lumea. Save Gabe's is a Facebook group with 981 members in support of finding a purpose for Gabe's Tower and preserving its history. This group is filled with articles about the history, updates on the current situation, pictures, and local support for the cause.

When Gabe Fiorella, Sr., moved to the corner of 18th and Triplett Streets of Owensboro, Kentucky, in 1959, he built a whole world — "a wonderful world," to borrow his phrase.

Gabe's Restaurant, Gabe's Shopping Center and, soon thereafter, Gabe's Motor Inn — long known as simply Gabe's Tower — created a whole ecology — the businesses fed off of one another.

So it must be now.

Owensboro's leaders of the last 50 years, since Gabe's Tower was completed, have not been good stewards of the Gabe's concept of a well-curated and mutually reinforcing commercial mix on that block. But this does not mean that the concept was flawed.

Which is to say: To "Save Gabe's" is not simply to save the tower. It is to save the entire Gabe's concept, by figuring out how to reinterpret the concept in a way that makes — and keeps — the Gabe's block vital and relevant now and for the next 50 years.

So, Save Gabe's! Not just the tower, but the whole concept that Gabe Fiorella brought to this block in 1959 — the idea of a vital commercial mix in which the grand (the tower and the restaurant) and the 'ground' (the shopping center) rubbed shoulders, to the mutual benefit of the parts and the whole.

Restore the tower, yes. But also reinterpret the larger concept of Gabe's for today. Reimagine the mix of businesses. Rehabilitate and redevelop the buildings and spaces on the block. And use this New Gabe's as a spur to the renewal of the entire neglected neighborhood.

Save Gabe's? Yes. But, ultimately: Re-Gabe's.

— John Lumea, Founder, Save Gabe's
“In elementary school, we got to go up to the pool floor for a morning show...the 360 view of our city was awesome...traveling in from highway 231, you could see it standing tall...it was like the “welcome beacon” to our city”

“Would love love Love to see Gabe’s Tower restored back to its old condition with the rooftop pool and restaurant on the 12th floor! I live in Owensboro but I would for sure pay to stay a night there!”

“We had every birthday here until it closed down and will be first online if it reopens.”

“My grandfather was Gabe. Gabe’s Motel has many memories for me as a child. It was heart breaking to see the shape and the changes it went through in the mid 1980’s. It was always been my dream to come back to it and see what an incredible building it is.”

“It was the hotel of western Kentucky in its day. Now however after many years of neglect it is an eyesore in a decaying neighborhood. Any revitalization must convert the adjoining shopping center and neighborhood to be successful.”

“I don’t know about Trump making America great again, but I think we can make every piece of Owensboro great again if people cared including Gabe’s Tower.”

“Remember there being a morning tv show broadcast from the roof. It was a fascinating building but the expansion of retail out Frederica and the Big E brought the towers demise. Was a shame.”

“My grandmother was married there. I also know people from Lexington that used to go there frequently back in the 70s.”

“I remember my first job was at the public library. We were taken to a Christmas lunch at Gabe’s Tower Restaurant. As a teen that made me feel so special.”

“Hope it can become a great place again.”

“My fondest memory is seeing the statue of Gabe Fiorella when we would be on that side of town. It was always a warm and welcoming figure. I thought how interesting it would be to meet the man. I never did, but did have the fortune of becoming friends with his grandchildren.”

“The round shape and that it was part of Mr. Gabe.”
COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

Through an online survey, the following are the results of community opinion on what should become of Gabe’s Tower.
Cocktail Lounge

SCHEMATIC DESIGN
The schematic design process focused on the allocation of space. With thirteen floors and over 65,000 square feet to plan, it was important to break the process down into clear steps. The project was broken into the main spaces of focus: lobby/entry floor, guest rooms, and restaurant. The lobby and restaurant took higher priority, as they were the rooms in which more historical and community impact could occur.

Due to the unique exterior and structure of the building, spatial planning is challenging yet critical to the overall success and influence of the design. The design in this phase focused on functionality and addressing the needs of the users. While these were the main areas of focus, it was important not to lose sight of historical importance.

Opportunities to incorporate historical significance were considered during this phase. While spatial planning remained broad, materials were examined at a preliminary level. This helped ensure that materiality is considered throughout the project to help create a cohesive design. It is important to make sure there is not disconnect between different levels of the building.

Precedent studies also played an important role in this phase. They provided insight into some of the obstacles faced with designing within a circular footprint. This phase relied heavily on hand sketching and drafting to quickly work through multiple iterations for the various spaces within the project. This also helped to define connections and adjacencies between the spaces.

Overall, this was an exploration phase that worked to better define the spaces specified within the programming phase. It provided insight into how the minimum square footages worked together and how much freedom there was for creativity and design within the space. It also worked to gather a more concrete understanding of the relationship of overall square footage to the square footages of the individual spaces.
INSPIRATION
## Preliminary Square Footage Considerations

**Project Name**: Revitalizing Gabe’s: a multi-use restoration project of an abandoned hotel  
**Designer**: Alissa Ramburger

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Space</th>
<th>Net Sq. Ft. (NSF)</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Total Sq. Ft. (TSF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lobby/Reception</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Restrooms</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest Rooms</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>30,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>3,420</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditorium/Multipurpose Room</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pool</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean Utility/Laundry</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soiled Utility</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storage</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gym/Health Facility</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Breakroom</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>39,620</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Gross Sq. Ft. (TGSF)**: 56,600  
**Divide Final Total Sq. Ft. by 0.7**:
SPACE PLANNING DIAGRAMS
PRELIMINARY FLOOR DIVISION PROPOSAL

- Pool/Rooftop Garden
- Restaurant
- Guest Rooms
- Auditorium/ Multipurpose Rooms
- Lobby/Reception/ Administrative Offices
The design development process focused on taking the space allocations explored in the schematic design phase and applying them in a practical manner. The focus remained on the lobby/entry floor, guest rooms, and restaurant. Two different guest room floor plans were proposed that displayed different concepts to gain insight from reviewers.

Attention to codes and users needs was important in this phase of the project. The floor plans had to be functional as well as accessible.

Opportunities to incorporate historical significance remained an important consideration during this phase. Providing opportunities for art in every space allowed for the history to shine through in the design. Overall, it was important to consider the entire experience of a user during this phase.

This phase explored the use of 3D modeling software to grasp the essence of the overall experience. Renderings of each space were developed to help convey this concept. These renderings also served as a way to examine the functionality of the space.

Overall, the design development phase worked to push the ideas generated in the schematic design phase and to bring the project to life.
FLOOR PLAN: GUEST ROOM/ONE BED

Scale: 1/16" = 1'0"
FLOOR PLAN: GUEST ROOM/TWO BED

Scale: $\frac{1}{16}” = 1’0”$
FLOOR PLAN: RESTAURANT

Scale: 1/16” = 1’0”
GUEST ROOM/ONE BED
GUEST ROOM/TWO BED
RESTAURANT
CONSTRUCTION DOCUMENTS
The construction documents phase focused in on a smaller portion of the overall project. The focus for this phase was on the second floor of the restaurant. This floor also includes custom component bar.

The custom component bar was an important part of this phase. It served as an opportunity to explore the concept of the project while playing with the unique structure of the building. It presented challenges, but overall offered a solution that highlighted the building structure.

Overall, this phase was an opportunity to delve deeper into the details and show how a space can transform from start to finish.
FF&E PLAN: RESTAURANT LEVEL 12

FINISH LEGEND

FLOORING:

LAM-1
TYPE: Commercial Laminate Flooring
MANUF: Armstrong
STYLE: Rustics Premium
COLOR: L6620 White Washed
INSTALL: Lock & Fold

BASE:

RB-1
TYPE: 4" Rubber Base
MANUF: Johnsonite
STYLE: Traditional 4"
COLOR: Stone

WALLS:

PT-1
TYPE: Interior Latex Paint
MANUF: California Paints
STYLE: Satin Finish
COLOR: Gable Green

WC-1
TYPE: Vinyl Wallcovering
MANUF: Designtex
STYLE: Bungalow
COLOR: Overcast

Scale: 1/16" = 1'0"
Scale: 1/16" = 1'0"
ELEVATION: CUSTOM COMPONENT BAR

MATERIALS: CUSTOM COMPONENT BAR

Base: Subway Tile

Top: Cipollino Grigio, Wilsonart
PLAN: CUSTOM COMPONENT BAR
SECTION: CUSTOM COMPONENT BAR

Front Counter - Scale: 1/4” = 1’0”

Back Counter - Scale: 1/4” = 1’0”
SECTION: CUSTOM COMPONENT BAR

Side - Scale: 1/4” = 1’0”

DETAIL: CUSTOM COMPONENT BAR

LED Light Detail -Scale: 1” = 1’0”
This section reflects the final proposal for the project. It examines the ideas from the previous sections and pushes them to develop a cohesive project. It is a display of the complete transformation of the project.

Floor plans, renderings, sections, and materials are presented to provide a holistic understanding of the space. The guest room floor plan is not shown in this section as it will remain the same as the two bedroom option in the design development phase. The floor plan presented in the design development phase will provide opportunities for growth and similar iterations to accommodate for user needs.

The main focus for this phase was pushing the restaurant and the lobby levels further to develop a strong connection and overall experience for the users.
FLOOR PLAN: ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES

Scale: 1/16" = 1’0”
FLOOR PLAN: RESTAURANT/LEVEL 11

Scale: 1/16" = 1'0"
FLOOR PLAN: RESTAURANT/LEVEL 12

Scale: 1/16" = 1'0"
FLOOR DIVISION PROPOSAL

- Lobby/Cafe/Spa/Gym
- Rental Offices/Conference (Level 9-10)
  Administrative Offices/Staff Break (Level 2-3)
- Guest Rooms
- Restaurant
- Pool/Rooftop Garden

NOTE ABOUT GUEST ROOM PLAN
Located in the cafe on the first level, adjacent to the lobby, these table tops will serve as advertisements for local businesses and events that help to make Owensboro unique. Each table top features the logo of the business or event and a brief description of what it is about and its history. The website for each is listed as well as a QR code that customers and visitors can scan for more information and directions from Gabe’s Tower. These table tops allow visitors to gain insight into the culture of Owensboro and its defining characteristics.

CAFE TABLE TOPS

Located in the cafe on the first level, adjacent to the lobby, these table tops will serve as advertisements for local businesses and events that help to make Owensboro unique. Each table top features the logo of the business or event and a brief description of what it is about and its history. The website for each is listed as well as a QR code that customers and visitors can scan for more information and directions from Gabe’s Tower. These table tops allow visitors to gain insight into the culture of Owensboro and its defining characteristics.
The International Bluegrass Music Museum is located in downtown Owensboro. The museum features interactive exhibits, posters, costumes, live instrument demonstrations, and the International Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame. As a non-profit group, the International Bluegrass Music Museum has raised funds with the help of famous bluegrass musicians such as Ricky Skaggs and Ralph Stanley. They host their own annual music festival, ROMP (River of Music Party) and hold jam sessions on the first Thursday of every month. The International Bluegrass Music Museum is the world’s only facility dedicated to honoring the history of bluegrass music.

117 Daviess Street
For more information visit: www.bluegrassmuseum.org

Over the last fifty-two plus years, Moonlite Bar-B-Q has grown into a very special business. In this time of large chains and merged companies Moonlite has grown as a family business. Hugh and Catherine, along with four children and several grandchildren work together to keep things going and growing at a slow, steady rate that now requires a staff of over 120 dedicated members working various facets of the business. These areas now include a 350 seat restaurant, a U.S.D.A. inspected processing plant, an extensive catering department (capable of serving 25 to 15,000 with unparalleled quality and professionalism), a wholesale division serving the region with Barbecue and related products through distributors in a four state area, as well as a busy carryout department. All this from a thirty seat, roadside restaurant in 1963.

2840 West Parrish Avenue
For more information visit: www.moonlite.com

The ROMP Festival (River Of Music Party) is the bluegrass and Americana music fest known for its stellar line-ups, friendly camping atmosphere, and easy access to artists that takes place in Owensboro each year, usually in June. Original arts and crafts, farm-to-table healthy food vendors, and professionally-led children’s activities, ensure audiences to ROMP. Above and beyond that, ROMP is beloved for its gorgeous setting, Yellow Creek Park, a 150-acre facility famous for its raptor rescue center, winding creek and fishing lake, sweeping tree-lines, nature trails and vast grassy fields, is very much part of the spirit and festival culture that brings thousands to ROMP each year.

570 KY 144
For more information visit: www.rompfest.com
RESTAURANT/LEVEL 11
MATERIALS

Lobby/Cafe

CF Stinson: Maxwell Place
Momentum: Intermix

Guest Rooms

Momentum: Fluent
Loomsource: Get Cozy

Momentum: Fluent
Loomsource: Snug

Momentum: Fluent
Loomsource: Credo

Momentum: Fluent
Momentum: Epic

Restaurant

Momentum: Melodeon

DesignTex: Mandala

CF Stinson: Impression

Wilsonart: Cipollino Blanco

DesignTex: Bungalow

Armstrong: Rustics
FURNITURE

Lobby/Cafe

Haworth: Settee

Restaurant

High Tower: Happy Sofa

High Tower: Happy Lounge

Steelcase: Switch
THANK YOU TO ALL WHO HAVE SUPPORTED AND CONTRIBUTED TO THIS PROJECT