

# Oklahoma City developer makes blighted apartments next target

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Over the past several years Jeff and Aimee Struble have either lived or worked in the 16th Street Plaza District, and have led much of its redevelopment.

They've celebrated the area's resurgence — but readily admit they did not enjoy a brief stint living in a historic home at NW 16 and Marion. The neighbors at the adjoining Eagles Next Apartments were not just noisy; the Strubles noticed the property appeared to be a constant source of noise, drug trafficking and crime.

“It was definitely a problem,” Struble said. “There were people in there we just didn't want around.”

Struble, who built new duplexes and redeveloped a vacant commercial strip center along NW 16, decided he couldn't say “no” when the owner of the apartments approached him with a sale offer.

“It was more than I wanted to take on at the time,” Struble said. “The whole block ended up being part of the deal with us buying from another couple who had a nearby duplex. We wanted to make a difference.”

Kristen Vails, executive director of the 16th Street Plaza District, was among those happily surprised when the property sales closed in April.

“It was a long time coming,” Vails said. “We were very excited; we didn't even know it was for sale.”

Like the Strubles, Vails had struggled with how the apartments appeared to attract the criminal element to 16th Street, a mixed-use historic corridor between Pennsylvania Avenue and Classen Boulevard.

Vails also has witnessed wave after wave of new shops filling formerly empty buildings with each renovation completed by the Strubles.

The first step taken by the couple was to simply close the apartments, which Vails observed was followed by a noticeable drop in crime.

Cleaning the apartments, Aimee Struble said, was a nasty task. The couple also faced a challenge in designing an adaptive use. The upstairs, all consisting of one-bedroom

apartments, could not be renovated back into housing without investing in an expensive sprinkler system for the entire building.

Struble is moving ahead with renovations of a second building in the complex — one with two-bedroom apartments that will remain housing. But the building fronting Blackwelder will be transformed into offices on the second floor with shops and restaurants on the ground floor.

The new exterior design for the building, built in the mid-1960s, will consist of a black-gray brick similar to the materials used at Classen Curve at Grand Boulevard and Western Avenue. Struble hopes the complex and adjoining duplexes will all share a similar look and feel — one he calls “sleek and modern.”

Sitting down in the recently opened Saint's Irish Pub across from the complex, the Strubles said they envision the Plaza District's revitalization spreading south into Classen-10-Penn, a neighborhood that has long struggled with crime and lax property maintenance. With an eclectic mix of shops, housing, offices and restaurants successfully established in area that once was riddled with boarded up buildings, the Strubles are thinking ahead.

Some might see Classen-10-Penn as an area that has long challenged police, city planners and council representatives hoping to revive the working class neighborhood. But the Strubles, buoyed by the successful turnaround of 16th Street, say they believe Classen-10-Penn is ripe for redevelopment — thanks to its proximity not just to NW 16, but also to MidTown, the thriving urban neighborhood to the east.

“There are a lot of neat, historic houses in Classen-10-Penn,” Struble said. “I can see opportunities there for a lot of first-time homebuyers. And it's the closest neighborhood to downtown with nice historic homes that are still affordable.”



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