

Old warehouses finally getting developed along Bricktown Canal

An influx of retail is finally filling up old warehouses that have failed to develop along the Bricktown Canal since it opened in 1999.

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Published: October 25, 2011

Visitors are now rocking along the Bricktown Canal — quite literally. The recently opened Captain Norm's Dockside Bar may be unlike any other establishment along the waterway in that it not only embraces being outside, close to the water, but it lives and dies there as well.

Captain Norm's is a dockside bar in the sense that it is built along one of the most elaborate canal patios — and the space inside the adjoining Hunzicker Bros. building is secondary.

When the canal opened in July, 1999, hopes ran high that the old warehouses that lined the waterway would quickly fill up with restaurants and shops. Early-day developers like Jim Brewer successfully argued to have the canal designed with two walkways, one at waterside, one at street level, to double up the opportunity for prime retail space. Brewer built out one of the most elaborate canal side patios in front of his Hunzicker Bros. building where he hosted an annual haunted warehouse.

An initial first burst of development followed with the openings of Bourbon Street Café, Mickey Mantle Steakhouse, Chelino's and Zio's, but except for a few other retailers that quickly came and went, development along the waterway stalled out over the next decade.

A mix of risk-takers and changing ownership are combining to give the canal a new burst of momentum. The sale of the Oklahoma Hardware Building over the summer is already paying off with the announced opening of Guestroom Records. And when Brent and Brett Brewer took over their family's holdings in Bricktown upon the death of their father Jim, they pushed development in a way he either couldn't or wouldn't.

They moved the haunted warehouse to the Coca-Cola Bricktown Event Center east of the ballpark, and finally created a true opening for development of the Hunzicker Building, one of the largest old warehouses along the canal.

That move, in turn, attracted the attention of Bob Bekoff, who as owner of the water taxis may be best tuned in to what visitors want and expect. It was Bekoff, along with the manager of the water taxis, Chad Huntington, who opened the Emporium, which specializes in locally themed gifts and goods. The pair also opened the marketplace,

which features dozens of local retailers selling a variety of toys, jewelry, clothing, books, gifts, art, kitchen ware and other goods.

Bekoff, in turn, teamed up with his son Norm, who ran the water taxis when they first started up in 1999, to launch Captain Norm's. Norm Bekoff shares the passion of his dad and Huntington for the canal, and the three together envisioned a bar that would appeal not so much to club hoppers, but rather those who might want to enjoy a nice evening on the canal with a drink in one hand, and maybe a cigar in the other. Their bar fills the entirety of the elaborate canal-side patio Jim Brewer built a dozen years ago but then was never developed.

The bar is set up like none other, featuring “gliding” booths that rock back and forth. These booths are not found anywhere else downtown, maybe anywhere in the city, and were discovered by the Bekoffs in their hometown of Fort Lauderdale. Oklahoma City's blossoming live music scene is showcased by Captain Norm's on weekends — a nice compliment to UCO's Academy of Contemporary Music next door.

The Brewers, meanwhile, have filled the street-level of their building with a Peachwave Frozen Yogurt shop and a Sammy's Pizza they promise will open soon.

Challenges remain along the canal. The empty buildings at 109 and 19 E California stand out even more as the surrounding area finally develops.

Controversy still rages over plans by Chris Johnson, owner of USA Screenprinting, to construct two buildings and surface parking along what is considered the most visible section of the canal (the empty land parallel to Mickey Mantle Drive). Plenty of empty space remains in floors above street level, as noted by planners in a study released last week.

But the dreams of early day promoters like Jim Brewer are finally coming true.



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