

 spotlight on
HOLLY WIEDEMANN

AN OLD BUILDING'S **BEST FRIEND**



LEXINGTON DEVELOPER
HOLLY WIEDEMANN HAS
BUILT AN OUTSTANDING
CAREER THROUGH
HISTORIC PRESERVATION
AND RENOVATION

By William Bowden
Photos by Boo Hardy





Holly Wiedemann confers with project executive Josh Warren, Messer Construction Company, as the historic Fayette County Courthouse restoration and renovation progresses toward a 2018 completion.

Holly Wiedemann sees every old, neglected building the way others might view a stray puppy. “I wish we could save them all,” she said. “Taking an abandoned building and conceiving a way to return it to its previous grandeur, to reinvigorate it and give it a new direction, is both my avocation and vocation.”

For nearly three decades she and her Lexington development company, AU Associates, have given a new lease on life to more than 30 buildings in Kentucky and West Virginia. A specialty has been rescuing obsolete, empty school buildings in small towns and converting them into affordable housing. Wiedemann and AU have won more than 40 industry and civic awards for these efforts.

Still, she readily admits that being project manager for the \$30 million restoration and renovation of Lexington’s historic 1900 Fayette County Courthouse is something special.

“This project is a joy and an honor and a delight because it is the confluence of so many different and positive aspects of urban revitalization,” said Wiedemann, a Lexington native and the founder, owner, and president of AU. “We are redeeming an incredibly important historic building that deserves to be put back into its former glory.”

The building lost its original purpose in 2002 when the judicial system moved into a new complex on Limestone Street. Next it was home to the Lexington History Museum until 2012, then stood vacant until the current historic restoration and renovation began in 2016. When completed sometime next year, the “new”



Wiedemann says the courthouse project, though not without its challenges, has come together beautifully and has been immensely satisfying.



The courthouse will retain many of its interesting architectural details.

courthouse will become the “Best of the Bluegrass,” as Wiedemann and others associated with the project like to call it.

The limestone exterior is being

restored to its former Richardsonian Romanesque grandeur while the interior is being redesigned for contemporary uses. The building’s tenants will include a Ouita Michel restaurant and a visitors center, both on ground level. The first and second stories will be devoted to VisitLEX administrative offices and the Breeders’ Cup international headquarters, respectively. The top level will host special events. (See sidebar.)

When it opens in 2018, the building’s prominent location on Main Street in the heart of downtown, with numerous restaurants and trendy clubs within easy walking distance, will make it a center of activity for residents and visitors alike.

Building up to it

Wiedemann’s affinity for historic structures goes back to her childhood living in a Central Kentucky farmhouse that dates from 1789, three years before Kentucky statehood. “I grew up with an



Wiedemann has overseen such adaptive use projects as the transformation of obsolete schools in Versailles, left, and Midway into apartments.

appreciation for the structure of historic buildings, the details, the strength and integrity of them,” she said. “To me, that means a lot.”

Wiedemann explored this interest in design and building as she earned a bachelor of landscape architecture with

an emphasis on urban design from the University of Georgia in 1978. She began her career in Tulsa with Urban Design Group, where she worked on large-scale creations such as Rivercenter in San Antonio and the Tabor Center in Denver.

Becoming intrigued with the finances

of such projects led her to complete an MBA at Duke University. There she met her husband, Bart van Dissel, a Ph.D. candidate at Duke who received a teaching offer from Harvard Business School. In Boston she landed a position with WinnCompanies and furthered her



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development education by working on affordable housing and historic preservation.

After her father died in 1986, Wiedemann moved back to Lexington with her husband and son and daughter. They purchased The Hollys, the farm on Newtown Pike in Scott County where she had grown up and that is her namesake. It had been her grandmother's home on the Hollingsworth side of the family. Her husband adapted his career to Kentucky, first traveling extensively as a management consultant and then joining Sleep Outfitters as chief operating officer.

Wiedemann founded AU Associates in 1990 on the principles of adaptive use (AU), focusing on urban infill and the revitalization of existing structures. Over the years she added construction and management units to the business, which now numbers 28 employees.

"The work I do is a happy confluence of all the components of my company," Wiedemann said. "Finance is really a prerequisite for understanding how all these elements can fit together."

Her first project was the Midway School Apartments, setting a tone for rescuing school buildings that continues to this day. That renovation, which won a Blue Grass Trust Award for Historic Preservation, features 24 apartments and includes



The fourth courthouse on this site, described as a "new temple of justice," was completed in 1900.

the Midway School Bakery, located in the school's former lunchroom.

Because of its impressive portfolio of successful projects and satisfied clients, AU has no need to market its services. Word of mouth attracts new clients, such as Woodford County Schools Superintendent Scott Hawkins. He recently worked with AU on the adaptive use of the former Versailles Elementary School, a 1930s building that was no longer useful for education. AU turned it into 13 attractive and affordable one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments.

"Holly and her company were great to work with," Hawkins said. "I never had any doubt that they would do the project and do it well. They preserved the original wood floors and the



Left, the interior of the dome, which will soar 50 feet above guests on the special events level, is being meticulously restored to its earlier grandeur. Center, two decorative urns in front of the courthouse feature this "Justice" inscription as well as "Law," "Peace," and "Liberty." Right, original brickwork revealed during the current project shows an arch that had been cut off by a new floor and filled in with brickwork during the 1960-61 renovation.

beautiful, large windows. It's nice to see an old building that has a lot of sentiment in the community still be of good use. Our board was extremely pleased."

The story of Lexington

Rescuing small-town school buildings is an admirable cause, but taking on the rehabilitation of a massive four-story, 117-year-old stone courthouse in the middle of the state's second-largest city is another matter altogether. The building's importance is underscored by its listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Since being selected for the job, Wiedemann has worked closely with Lexington Mayor Jim Gray to fulfill the vision he and others have for the rebirth of the iconic courthouse. Her reverence for the historical character of a building dovetails precisely with how Gray feels about the role of the courthouse in Lexington's past.

"The courthouse represents a particular element of institutional architecture and design that gives a marker in history for the city," Gray said. "At that time and period when it was constructed, there was a real commitment to public architecture as a symbol of America and its strength. The building has a great presence about it. Restoring it means preserving a vital part of the story of Lexington as well as bringing it back to life for a new purpose."

The major task for the exterior restoration was to clean the massive limestone blocks that form the walls and clean and restore the grand front steps facing Main Street. Extensive work has also been done on the roof, cupola, and decorative stonework. The roof has been restored with slate from the same



Said Wiedemann: "Of all the projects I've done, this one has had the best set of conditions all the way through."

source in Virginia that supplied the original.

It was a grand day for Gray and Wiedemann when more than a century's worth of grime and soot had been removed and the newly scrubbed exterior finally showed forth.

"When we had the reveal of removing the scaffolding, it was almost like a Phoenix emerging," Wiedemann said. Added Gray, "When the ribbon is cut for the grand reopening in 2018, that building is going to look as good as it did in 1900."

Gray is especially excited about the exterior lighting that will give the courthouse a dramatic effect at night. "It's going to be beautiful. And it's appropriate since it's the first institutional building in Lexington we know of that had electrification."

A 1960-61 interior renovation to make the courthouse more practical by creating additional office space meant that much of the building's interior historical fabric was removed. Workers today are

reversing much of that renovation to create the new design.

The interior is where you'll often find Carter Scott, project architect with K. Norman Berry Associates Architects in Louisville. He and his firm are realizing the aesthetic tone set by the initial schematic design work of Deborah Berke and Deborah Berke Partners in New York City.

"The idea is to create a modern reinterpretation of historic details whenever possible," Scott said. "For example, the grand outside steps once led up to beautiful wooden doors, which were replaced with an aluminum storefront entrance in 1960. We are installing a beautiful new version of those original doors."

One of the most prominent historical aspects being rescued

HOSPITALITY IS ON THE MENU

Justice has not been served at the historic Fayette County Courthouse since the last verdict was rendered in February 2002. However, visitors to the newly restored and renovated building can count on being served a delectable dish of Kentucky-flavored cuisine at chef Ouita Michel's new restaurant.

Michel's eatery, her eighth in the area, will be among the tenants giving the repurposed edifice an entirely new lease on life. VisitLEX will have a visitors center there as well as its administrative offices, and the Breeders' Cup will set up its international headquarters. The dramatic top level with its stunning domed ceiling will host special events.

Michel's casual dining restaurant will offer counter and table service, with both indoor and outdoor seating on the courthouse terraces. It will be based on her popular Windy Corner Market on Bryan Station Road, whose affordable menu features local food.

"My company mission is to show people how they can integrate the area's farming community into their eating habits," Michel said. "With the Farmer's Market on the Fifth Third Bank Pavilion literally right outside my new courthouse restaurant, it's likely that we will have whole plates with food coming right from those vendors on that same day."

Mary Quinn Ramer, president of VisitLEX, believes the courthouse will be an ideal location from which to promote Lexington as a tourism and business destination. Administrative offices will occupy the first story while a visitors center will be on ground level at the corner of Upper and Short streets.

"We will be in the heart of downtown where entertainment and culinary corridors have popped up along Short Street and other nearby locations," she said. "Our visitors center will be a hospitality hub for visitors to gather information and branch out to any direction downtown and in the region."

For Craig Fravel, president and CEO of the Breeders' Cup, relocating the international headquarters from a suburban setting to the heart of downtown will bring many benefits, both symbolic and practical. His administrative offices will occupy the second story of the courthouse.

"We feel that being part of a historic renovation project and focusing on the great things going on in downtown Lexington will raise the profile of the Breeders' Cup as an integral part of the Lexington business community," he said. "If we are having potential sponsors coming to visit, it will showcase a very interesting and dynamic side to our city, and that is a complement to the Thoroughbred racing industry."



COURTESY OF K. NORMAN BERRY ASSOCIATES

The ceiling of the soaring dome is a highlight of the renovation.



JENN JACKSON/THIRD LIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

Ouita Michel's ground-level restaurant will feature menu items from her popular Windy Corner Market.



is the ceiling of the soaring dome, which was closed off in 1960. Its beautiful decorative plaster work, which will be visible to special event patrons 50 feet above them, is being restored and recreated. “I was expecting the reveal of that dome to be impressive, but when it got to the point we could walk out and actually be in that space, it was unbelievable,” Scott said.

Scott shares the view of many others that the restored courthouse will help make the center of downtown a more attractive and lively place to be. “It’s going to be the civic heart of the city and a very pedestrian-friendly area,” he said. “This will be the place you want to be on a Friday or Saturday night.”

Wiedemann will tell you that every project, especially one of this magnitude, has its challenges. With the courthouse, trying to limit disruption in the center

of a busy city, creating new foundations for heating and ventilating mechanicals, seeking historic preservation approvals, and locating tenants are among the litany of concerns she cites. However, this project is going remarkably well, she said.

“Of all the projects I’ve done, this one has had the best set of conditions all the way through. There is a comprehensive desire across all levels, from a visionary mayor and city council to workers on the site and our exceptional architects and contractor, to make this project a success.”

Topping it off

The completed rebirth of the historic Fayette County Courthouse will surely be one of the crown jewels in Wiedemann’s and AU’s portfolio. It perfectly encompasses her company’s prime directive, the revitalization and adaptive use of

historic structures.

Leading her company in these pursuits for 27 years has brought Wiedemann many honors, including 2011 Business Owner of the Year from the National Association of Women Business Owners. She serves her profession in many ways, including as a member of the board of the National Housing and Rehabilitation Association. AU has won four Timmie Awards for national excellence in historic preservation and adaptive reuse, among other honors.

In the end, beyond the jargon of her profession and the complexity of her projects, the essential motivating factor in this remarkable woman’s persona is perhaps captured in her simple, direct statement: “I think I just like to fix things.” **KM**



The courthouse is set to be a centerpiece of a vital and vibrant downtown.