



Everything New Orleans

## Former Audubon Building is being redeveloped as a New Orleans hotel

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**Jaquetta White, The Times-Picayune**  
By

He hadn't intended to buy a hotel. In New Orleans only for a day as he and his family waited out bad weather before resuming their trip home to Dallas from Florida, David Mark Wyant had only planned to take a stroll down Canal Street.



John McCusker/The Times-Picayune

The former Audubon Building in New Orleans will become a hotel later this year.

But as he passed a venerable but derelict building at the corner of Burgundy Street and noted its for sale sign, the American Airlines pilot who has developed several chain hotels decided he had to call the seller, even as he assumed the building was out of his price range.

Turns out, the price had been dropped that morning, 45 minutes before his call.

"I called my mom (his business partner) and told her to get down here," Wyant said. "We had to buy it."

The object of Wyant's acquisition was the century old Audubon Building that once housed professional offices and retail shops, but has lain empty for more than a decade.

Wyant plans to reopen it as The Saint

Hotel in mid-December.

The Dallas developer purchased the building in foreclosure for \$5.35 million in April 2010. He plans to give it new life after a one-and-a-half-year renovation costing more than \$39 million.

The eight-story building at 931 Canal St. next door to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel was built in 1910 and originally designed to be used as a hotel but was turned into mixed use retail and office space instead.

It also housed the Woolworth's Department Store for a period before the shop moved to another Canal Street location.

For more than a decade, however, the property has either been mostly or completely vacant.

In 1998, a Canadian developer announced plans to convert the building, then used for retail on the lower floors, into a 203-room hotel. But the project fell through, in part, because of an inability to get financing. In 2000, a second group of developers pitched a 208-room hotel at the site. However, demolition and construction on what was supposed to be the Hilton New Orleans French Quarter Hotel didn't get underway until 2004, slowed by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks which put a damper on the travel industry nationwide.



John McCusker/The Times-Picayune

David Wyant, a commercial pilot for American Airlines, is redeveloping the Audubon Building site.

Hurricane Katrina canceled the plan to turn it into a hotel altogether and the developers in 2006 decided the property should be condominiums instead.

By 2009, the property had fallen into foreclosure and was seized. It lay dormant until Wyant's unplanned stroll.

When it opens in December, the troubled building will be a 166-room hotel with a restaurant and bar.

Wyant has developed Holiday Inn and Hampton Inn hotels, but said that as he travels the country as a pilot he has been collecting ideas for hotel development to use whenever he got the opportunity to do a project with fewer restrictions than a chain hotel.

"I knew someday I'd find a venue that I could pull this all together," Wyant said. His partner in the project is his mother, Jana Wyant.

It's not likely Wyant's project will collapse in a fashion to its predecessors because it has already cleared the financing hurdle, said Henry Charlot, economic development director for the Downtown Development District.



"They are in construction. It's not like they still have to get over development hurdles like financing," Charlot said. "This is the real deal. It's not a hoped for or planned development. It's happening."

Wyant said he intends to restore the building to its appearance on opening day 101 years ago. He has been using a picture of the building taken shortly after its opening in 1910 as a guide. That restoration includes having tin ceiling manufacturer, W.F. Norman, the company that produced the original pressed tin on the building's outer canopy create replacements for the hotel.

Wyant also intends to bring some of the exterior in. The frieze of a lion head on the building's exterior will be recreated on a pool table in the hotel lobby.

Overall, however, the hotel will be more modern inside. Twenty-one foot tall gypsum columns crafted by Italian artisans will be joined to each other by backlit white drapes and lead the way through the hotel's main lobby, giving it an ethereal feel, Wyant said.

"It's something we thought would mesh well with the historical exterior," Wyant said of what he called a "whimsical" design plan. "We want it to feel new and vibrant and fresh. It's a look that nobody will have here."

Enlarged photographs of the property in 1910 and during Carnival in 1921 will be featured in the lobby, which can be accessed from both Canal Street and Burgundy Street.

The first level of the hotel will house a restaurant, Sweet Olive, led by Chef Michael Stoltzfus. The hotel will also house a Burgundy Bar, which will feature local music acts, Wyant said. A second bar will be on the hotel's rooftop.

In a bit of whimsy, the 166 white-walled guest rooms will have blue ceilings, Wyant said.

"As an airline pilot it falls into what we're taught: Keep the blue side up," Wyant said.

Another 14 rooms, all three-bedroom suites on the hotel's second level will open in late 2012 during a second phase of construction that will also include a 5,000 square foot meeting room.

Wyant said he would compare the finished product to the W or International House hotels in New Orleans, attracting a 30 to 50-year old client who "likes design and things that are historically tied to the area."

The opening of The Saint will continue a recent spate of improvements to that section of Canal Street, which has spent years in decline. The hotel will be just down the street from the 1201 Canal condominiums, which are directly across the street from the Joy Theatre. The theater is undergoing a \$5 million renovation. Nearby is the New Orleans BioInnovation Center and the in-repair Saenger Theatre.

Charlot said an employee-heavy operation such as a hotel will increase foot traffic to Canal Street, which in turn would spur more development.

"It's major," Charlot said. "We see it as a beautiful addition to Canal Street."

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