

Restaurant developers overcome obstacles to achieve their dream

BY ROB MYRES

My enduring recollection of the early days of the great project was the outline of one of my partners silhouetted against the early morning sunlight in full sandblasting gear. The image was filtered through a dense combination of airborne sand and dirt, as I sat with my back against the wall and tried to clear the grit from my eyes.

We were two months into a massive effort to sandblast 60 years of paint from the brick, wood and steel of our 13,000-foot warehouse.

We had worn out every sandblaster that could be rented in Southeast Idaho and eventually finished the job by borrowing one we happened upon by chance while we were driving around at 5 a.m. on the remote back lot of a local construction company.

We tested the machine for the owner, free of charge, for over three weeks and only reluctantly returned it when he happened to recognize it while driving by one day.

The low point of the project came on a cold December morning around 6 a.m., while three of us stood around and watched Jeff Klinger, one of my partners, try to rebuild a single working sandblaster by cannibalizing parts from three others that had worn out. We hopped from one foot to the other and sipped hot coffee to stay warm, while taking turns holding the light and handing tools down to Jeff who was underneath the monster sandblaster surrounded by valves and hoses.

To save money, we recycled sand, filling the hopper from the several inches of sand, paint chips, dirt and grime that covered the floor of the building. We filtered the concoction through an old window screen, occasionally mixing in a bag of new sand, but still it clogged the sandblaster time and again. It was a cold, dirty, back-breaking job that slowly chipped away at our enthusiasm for the do-it-yourself approach that we had chosen.

Kinport Junction Warehouse, 815 S. First Ave., was borne from the dreams of a few locals who partnered to create a restaurant, Senang, and retail experience that is unique and special in Southeast Idaho. We aimed to

create a space that countered this movement toward mediocrity and conformity. We felt then and feel now that Pocatello is a great place to live, and that if we want to make it even better, we must be willing to invest our own time and money to create a place that people are truly proud to have in their town.

Our first obstacle presented itself even before we could steal our first sandblaster. It seemed that the local banks did not share our enthusiasm for rebuilding an abandoned warehouse in a dodgy part of town. We were turned down first by the small, community-based banks, and later by nearly every other bank in town. For good measure, one bank turned us down twice.

Finally, Wells Fargo, either out of a true sense of vision or in a moment of weakness and confusion, mustered the courage to throw its support behind our group of amateur but passionate developers. Southeast Idaho Council of Governments and the Eastern Idaho Development Corp. also turned out to be willing investors and trusted advisers — it often seemed that they had more confidence in us than we had in ourselves.

Without the support of Noel Christensen of Wells Fargo, Southeast Idaho Council of Governments and Matt Creamer of the Eastern Idaho Development Corp., it is safe to say that Kinport Junction Warehouse would never have gotten beyond a few sketches on the back of a bar napkin.

After several months of negotiation, appraisals, environmental inspections, and requisite financial molestation of the partners that is the modern day underwriting process, we gathered in a conference room on a cold and clear November day and signed away all our retirement assets for the opportunity to donate every free hour of our lives to hard labor for the next 9 months. Before the project was finished, we would each dig deep to find more money to keep the project alive, incur considerable stress and anxiety, push our bankers to the brink, and time and again, wonder aloud why we didn't just hand our retirement savings over to one Wall Street thief or another like every other good American.

After closing on the property, we immediately began refining our design and construction plan in earnest. While the smart money suggested an experienced architectural firm, we chose our own path, as we would do so many times throughout the project — sometimes finding success and savings and at other times finding ourselves hopelessly confused or deep inside a hole that might have



Rob Myres, left, and Ryker Brown, the executive chef at the Senang restaurant, at the Kinport Junction Warehouse in Pocatello.

BELOW: Photos taken during the remodeling of Kinport Junction Warehouse.



been averted if we had enlisted a highly paid professional for advice.

Managing our own design and engineering was a demanding but rewarding process. While we shared common elements of what the final product would be, we found that at the granular level we each had different ideas about décor, colors, materials, best use of floor space, and generally how to get the most out of our very limited budget.

Many a stable and loving marriage has come under considerable duress during the process of designing and building a home, so you can imagine the strain on a five-way partnership as we sought to tease out those ideas that were most practical and provided the best value in rehabilitating a three-story warehouse that had never known heating, plumbing or electricity, and was not originally designed for anything more honorable than open warehouse space.

On the business side, we faced a considerable challenge in convincing retail business owners that we were at the leading edge of a project that would ultimately result in a beautiful and much sought-after building, and a movement that would eventually lead to a full-scale rejuvenation of a part of town that at that time could best be described as sketchy.



Penny Pink had done much of the groundwork with her success at Portneuf Valley Brewing, but at the time we were trying to get leases signed it was a stretch for even the most open-minded entrepreneur to consider moving their business to our building.

We focused our appeal on those dreamers who were not bound by the confines of the logic put forth by the more practically-minded real-estate professionals with their talk of traffic counts and other such nonsense.

Dreamers are rarely bound by statistics or the restrictive ramblings of people who are visionary-challenged, and we knew that only the purest of dreamers would devote their energy to our project. Like us, those early adopters of our vision were probably at least a little naive, for which we are thankful.

Naivety is that necessary bit of faith that bridges the gap between pragmatism and the dream of creating something beautiful from an abandoned warehouse. Occasionally the dreamers pull off a surprise victory against incredible odds.

Only time will tell if Kinport Junction Warehouse can endure the fickle cycle of retail and restaurant trends over the long term, but for now at least, we are being well rewarded for being allowed to pursue our dreams, and for that we are immensely grateful to the community for its support.

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