

Florida firm is furnishing new life for historic building

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A Florida interior designer and furniture retailer is saving a little bit of Queen City history.

Jim Howard is investing more than \$1 million to renovate the Charlotte Woman's Club clubhouse on East Morehead Street. Howard plans to open a high-end furniture and interior-design store in the building.

"We feel very charmed by Charlotte and this building," says Howard, owner of James Michael Howard Inc. interior design. "We're trying to stay true to the architect. When you walk into the store, you'll think it's one of Charlotte's finest homes. The architectural detail exactly matched our needs."

The Charlotte Woman's Club building, designed by renowned Charlotte architect Charles C. Hook, was completed in 1925 and played an important role in the emergence of the women's movement. The clubhouse was designated a historical landmark in 1978. Hook also designed the VanLandingham Estate, the Duke Mansion, a home for Belk founder William Belk and as many as 35 houses in Dilworth.

The exterior of the building, which Howard bought in July for \$2.2 million, will be nearly completely preserved or restored. A small balcony will be built on to the rear, and a skylight will be added to the roof. The interior, except for the front three rooms, will be gutted and transformed into retail space.

"It's an incredible piece of our architectural history," says Dan Morrill of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission. "The best

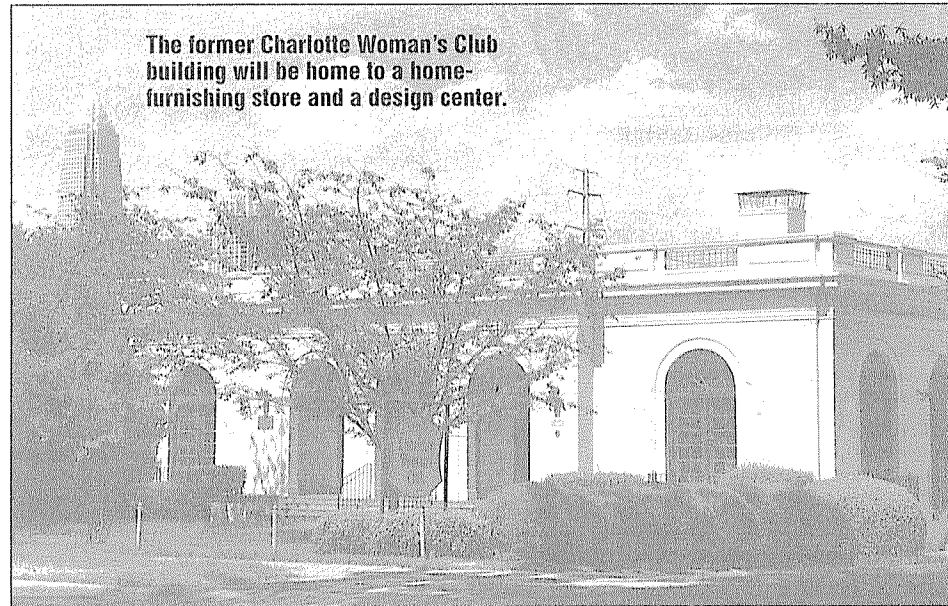


photo JEN WILSON

way to maintain the existence of these architectural artifacts is for them to have an ongoing, economically viable use."

One building, two brands

Howard plans to open two brands within the 9,000-square-foot space. Max & Co. will occupy the first floor, and Mrs. Howard will be on the second. Max & Co., named for Howard's son, offers hip, edgy furniture for a younger clientele. A grand staircase with a skylight above will lead to Mrs. Howard, named for Howard's wife. It will sell higher-end, traditional furniture and accessories.

Both will offer everything from sofas and beds to chandeliers and antiques.

Prices range from about \$2,000 to \$8,000 for a sofa and from about \$1,000 to \$50,000 for antiques. Furnishings are sourced from around the world, and Howard says most are custom made.

Designers will also be on hand for interior decorating. Howard says the store will have a lot of inventory in stock to be able to transform a whole house within a week, if necessary.

"It's instant gratification," he says.

The store is expected to open in January.

Howard's work has been featured in *House Beautiful*, *Elle Decor* and *Southern Accents*, among others.

He has stores in Jacksonville and Jacksonville Beach, Fla., and two in Atlanta. Howard hopes to eventually

open offices throughout the Southeast, including Nashville, Tenn.; Birmingham, Ala.; and Palm Beach, Fla., among others.

Model preservation

The renovation plan for the building was approved this week by the city landmarks commission.

Plans for the small balcony at the rear of the building are being reworked to make clear it's an addition.

"We'd love to see this project proceed," says Stewart Gray of the landmarks commission. "The interior changes are substantial but necessary to redo the building."

The commission says the other bidders for the building wanted to tear it down.

Howard says he worked with Charlotte Woman's Club members on the plans. "The ladies are going to be really proud," he says.

The club, which is still active, vacated the building within the last year. The group was founded in 1899 as the Study Club for Mothers. A few years later, it expanded its membership and civic activities and changed its name. The group helped form the first kindergarten, YWCA and PTA in Charlotte. It also played an instrumental role in establishing the Mint Museum of Art.

Architect Joe Elliott of The RBA Group expects the city to approve the building plans in about three weeks. Charlotte-based Kuhklin Builders is the general contractor.

Says Morrill: "If people think creatively, sometimes the bottom line and historic preservation work together."

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