

Brad Pitt's foundation to help redevelop Bancroft School

BY KEVIN COLLISON
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A bond forged in storm-ravaged New Orleans between actor Brad Pitt and a local architecture firm is bearing fruit in Kansas City — and may show the path forward to reusing dozens of empty schools.

The long-closed Bancroft School at 4300 Tracy Ave. will be renovated into affordable apartments and a community center with the aid of the Make It Right Foundation founded by Pitt, a Hollywood superstar with deep Missouri roots, and the creative talents of BNIM Architects, his helper in New Orleans.

“Brad Pitt is a frustrated architect,” said Bob Berkebile, a founding partner at BNIM. “If he wasn’t making millions as an actor, he’d be an architect.”

The \$14 million project calls for the existing 103-year-old brick school building to be converted into 29 affordable apartments with a 6,250-square-foot community center on the main floor. A new building with 21 apartments will also be developed.

The community area will house the office of the Manheim Neighborhood Association and provide space for outreach programs offered by Truman Medical Center. A foot patrol station for the Kansas City Police Department also will be part of the mix.

The development also will include a secure garage for 50 vehicles that will feature an environmentally friendly green roof.

The two-story school was closed a dozen years ago and occupies a 2.7-acre site. Currently, the Kansas City School District has 38 closed buildings scattered throughout the city, including 26 shut down two years ago in a major downsizing.

Backers of the Bancroft renovation say it could be a good model for how to redevelop other closed schools. The district had set a deadline of last week for proposals to reuse or “repurpose” its inventory of shuttered buildings.



Allison Long

Before a Monday news conference at the Bancroft School site, Rep. Emanuel Cleaver embraced Mike Richardson, who lives near the school.

Bancroft School to be renovated

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"I hope it will inform the other repurposing projects," Berkebile said. "We've submitted proposals for three schools."

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BNIM was one of several firms chosen by Pitt and the Make It Right Foundation in 2007 to create designs for affordable homes that could be built in New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward, a neighborhood devastated by Hurricane Katrina. About 150 homes have been built so far.

One of BNIM's architects on that New Orleans endeavor, Tim Duggan, wound up working for the foundation. That was the bridge to the Bancroft project, the first renovation done by the foundation and only the second project outside New Orleans, the other being in Newark, N.J.

"Tim and BNIM got the attention of Make It Right that a catalytic development was needed for the Green Impact Zone," Berkebile said. "It seemed like a perfect partnership.

"A lot has happened in the Green Impact Zone, but unfortunately there hasn't been a lot of concrete development for both the residents and the community and investors from the outside."

Pitt was out of the country, Duggan said, and unable to attend a Monday press event announcing the Bancroft development.

The entire project will be built to LEED Platinum environmental standards and marks the first major project to be built in the Green Impact Zone, which was designated and funded with the help of U.S. Rep. Emanuel Cleaver about two years ago.

Cleaver described the Bancroft redevelopment as an excellent example of a public-private partnership working to revive a poor neighborhood.

"We welcome Make It Right to Kansas City and the Green Impact Zone, and we thank all of the many, many people who have worked so tirelessly to make this day a reality. This is one more step forward, a very big one, in keeping jobs, creating jobs and continuing to boost the local economy."

Funding for the project includes federal historic tax credits, state low-income housing tax credits, state charitable contribution tax credits and \$2.3 million from the Make It Right Foundation. US Bank Community Development Corp. is assisting with the financing.

"I can tell you, on this day, mayors across the nation are jealous that here in the heart of Kansas City we will build a model of sustainable urban reinvestment," Mayor Sly James said.

Rents will range from \$470 a month for a one-bedroom apartment to \$695 for a three-bedroom. The project also will include renovation of the historic auditorium, which will be used for resident and community functions.

Berkebile said the redevelopment of Bancroft School will restore the historic building's place as an anchor to its surrounding community.

"This is a new kind of educational lever," he said. "By reusing schools, it rebuilds human capacity into the neighborhood. Not just the new residences, but the community it serves."

About 100 residents and reporters crowded into a dingy former classroom without power for a press conference attended by Cleaver and James to learn about the plan for the old school, which neighborhood leader Sandra Hayes described as an eyesore and target for vandals since its closing in 2000.

Last year, the neighborhood association began a clean-up project for the property that, along with police help, began to make a difference in the area. Hayes, the president of the Historic Manheim Neighborhood Association, said crime dropped 26 percent from 2010.

Now, the prospects of a complete redevelopment promises even more positive news.

"This project will help because it will become a community campus with the Truman Medical Center programs, senior activities, day care, job training, arts and crafts — that will change the whole fabric of the neighborhood," Hayes said.

"Our community wants to take control back, and by doing that, we're uplifting the community."

Although Pitt wasn't among those attending the announcement, Hayes was confident the popular actor would come by sometime.

"We'll see him eventually," she said. "This is his foundation."

As for whether the redevelopment of Bancroft will launch further renovations of vacant schools, James pointed out the project had been the product of a unique set of circumstances.

"For this to happen elsewhere, we need other players, which are difficult to come by, but maybe this will be the catalyst to get us there."

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