

New owners of 304 King St. find history under drywall

Jessica and Grant Dees recently bought 304 King St. and planned to open a coffee shop or a deli in a seemingly unremarkable building.

That was before they ripped away the drywall, glanced above the 9-foot dropped ceiling and found all kinds of remarkable plaster details, old light sockets and moldings that testified to the building's rich, playful — and mostly forgotten — history.

Their architect, Reggie Gibson, knew this discovery might cause a change in plans.

"This was going to be a small renovation to use as much of LeRoy's Jewelers as possible," Gibson recalls, "then I said, 'Y'all, there's something going on here.'"

Those surviving architectural details shook down the plans, tripled the budget and ultimately led to the opening of the upscale Sonoma Cafe five weeks ago.

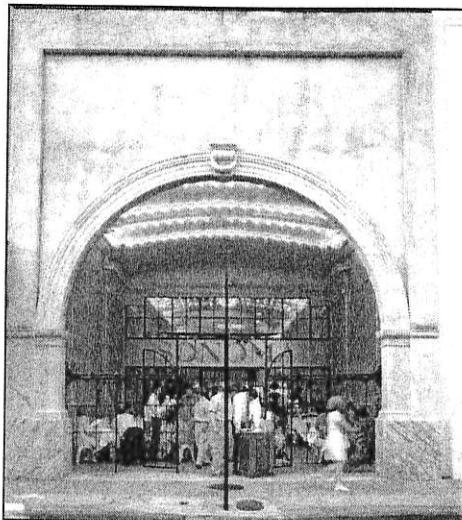
The restaurant is just the latest recycling of the 99-year-old building, which has been, in chronological order, an arcade, a movie theater, an electrical company, a house of music, a furniture store and a jewelry store.

Now, Gibson and the Dees have turned it into a remarkably airy, artistic space that recalls its fun-filled past while serving a completely new use.



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Staff Photo by Tom Spain

The Sonoma Cafe at 304 King Street is busy Friday evening. The building has housed many businesses in 99 years.

The structure at 304 King St. was built by Albert Sottile around 1898 as Riddock's Arcade,

See **BUILDING**, Page 4-B

5-26-97



Photo Courtesy of Pastime Amusement Co.

Southern Furniture Co. occupied the space from 1936 to 1972.



File Photo

LeRoy's Jewelers opened at 304 King St. in 1972.

BUILDING

from Page 1-B

complete with a deluxe soda fountain. By 1913, however, that business had failed, and it was converted to the Princess Theater and used exclusively as a movie house.

The theater didn't thrive either: It had shut down by 1927, which was — coincidentally — the year in which the first "talkie" movie, "The Jazz Singer," debuted.

By 1927, the building was used by the Louis D. Rubin Electrical Co., and by 1934, it was Carolina Electric Co. and Pickett's House of Music, says Peter Wilkerson of the S.C. Historical Society. By 1936, it became Southern Furniture Co., which remained until LeRoy's Jewelers opened there in 1972.

Even when it was a furniture store, there was a fun element.

In November 1952, the furniture store laid the world's longest print enamel rug on King Street for a five-day durability demonstration that would prove to be one of the city's biggest marketing blunders.

The rug — which measured 9 feet by 228 feet — lasted a day. "Big Rug Fails To Survive Traffic Test," The News and Courier noted, quoting store owner Gerald Stelling as saying. "We have reason to believe that some motorists last night skidded their cars over it and purposefully spun their wheels to see if it would tear. The spinning wheels caused the rug to kink and anything

hitting the kinks would tear it.

"When we came to work this morning, it was pretty well chewed up. The purpose of the demonstration was to show that the rug would not wear out — not that it couldn't be torn up."

Anyway, back to architecture.

Gibson says many of the cafe's details — pilasters, column capitals, dental work, ceiling trim, mirror frames and light fixture moldings — were replicated from at least one original plaster work that still existed inside the building.

Other touches, such as setting the doorway back from King Street by about 20 feet, were designed based on clues in the flooring that showed it once was that way.

"We tried to get our clues from what was here," Gibson says, adding the storage racks behind the bar had shapes recalling the building's central arch.

Gibson credits the Dees for being flexible enough to change their plans to fit the building's history and for returning a fun, public use to the site.

"The building was bigger than we thought it was. When we got everything uncovered, it was just a grand scale," Jessica Dees says. "When we saw all the molding, it just screamed for a full-blown restaurant."

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